SUPPORTING HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS TO PROVIDE FINANCIAL AID ADVISING TO STUDENTS

by
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Abstract

Nationally, there is significant socioeconomic and racial disparity in college access and attainment (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). Using social capital theory as a framework, this dissertation first explores literature on factors related to this national challenge. Then, this dissertation narrows in on high school counselors' role in providing financial aid to their students, as purveyors of social capital, in order to increase their students' likelihood to access college. Based on findings from a needs assessment, this dissertation uses social capital theory to review literature on ways high school counselors can effectively support their students in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Next, this dissertation uses sociocultural theory to review literature on high-quality professional learning. Then, findings from the literature review are used to shape a plan for professional development for high school counselors on FAFSA completion strategies. The study involves a randomized control trial of a FAFSA completion intervention with treatment and control groups of New Orleans public high school counselors and their students. Employing a mixed methods design, this study analyzes process and outcome evaluation data. Results from this study indicate higher growth rates in FAFSA completion in schools receiving the professional development intervention than in schools that did not receive the intervention. Findings reinforce extant research and suggest that when counselors use a tiered approach to provide FAFSA completion and verification support, their students complete the FAFSA at higher rates.

Keywords: College access, FAFSA completion, high school counselors, social capital theory, sociocultural theory, professional learning

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Executive Summary

Nationally, there are considerable socioeconomic and racial disparities in access to college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Heckman, Lochner & Todd, 2008; Kane & Rouse 1995; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). This dissertation began with a description of this problem and an explanation of why this problem is important. From there, Chapter 1 presented social capital theory as a framework for understanding underlying causes and factors. Then, this dissertation synthesized literature using key constructs from the theoretical framework. Finally, Chapter 1 concluded with a rationale for the specific factors selected for empirical examination.

Chapter 2 then focused on the role that high school counselors can play in providing financial aid advising to their students. This chapter presented results from a needs assessment conducted to understand the challenges facing New Orleans high school counselors with respect to their college financial aid advising. Findings suggested a need to increase counselors' capacity to support their students on the FAFSA as well as their contact with students and families.

Building on the findings of the needs assessment, Chapter 3 utilized social capital theory and sociocultural theory as frameworks to examine the intervention literature. The first portion of this chapter used social capital theory to examine literature describing effective interventions to improve FAFSA completion support. The second part of Chapter 3 used sociocultural theory to review literature on professional learning, which was the mechanism for delivering the intervention with high school counselors. Finally, drawing from elements of the interventions reviewed, Chapter 3 concluded with an overview of the proposed intervention, which focused on equipping counselors with tools to efficiently provide comprehensive FAFSA support to their students using a tiered approach.

Drawing from the research presented in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 outlined the intervention procedure and evaluation methodology. This intervention focused on equipping New Orleans high school counselors to provide comprehensive FAFSA completion support to their students using a tiered approach. New Orleans high schools were recruited to participate in the study and randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. Once schools were assigned to treatment and control groups, baseline equivalence between the treatment and control schools on FAFSA completion rates was analyzed using an independent sample t-test prior to starting the intervention.

Treatment group counselors participated in one three-hour training session on the FAFSA, how to use individual FAFSA completion reports, and research-based strategies to increase FAFSA completion and a second three-hour training on how to support students who had been selected for verification. Following the trainings, counselors participated in monthly collaborative professional learning sessions focused on responding to individual FAFSA completion reports and implementing effective FAFSA completion strategies.

This mixed-method research study sought to address process and outcome evaluation questions. Qualitative process and outcome data including interview transcripts, observational field notes, and open-ended survey responses were studied using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis steps included transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, and searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Quantitative FAFSA completion data pulled from the U.S Department of Education in June 2018, January 2019, and June 2019 were analyzed in Excel and SPSS to determine differences in FAFSA completion rates between treatment and control schools using descriptive and inferential analyses. Analyses of the impact of the treatment relied on comparing treatment and control schools on measures of growth in FAFSA completion rates

using independent sample t-tests.[1]

Chapter 5 described intervention implementation, presented findings, and discussed relationships to literature and practice. Several key findings emerged. Students of treatment group counselors completed the FAFSA at higher rates than their control group peers, (79.6%) versus (69.4%), as of June 2019. More importantly, there were treatment effects on the difference in FAFSA completion gains from June 2018 to June 2019 (Glass's delta = 1.18,[2]) and from January 2019 to June 2019 (Glass's delta = .3925,[3]). Findings reinforced extant research and suggested that when counselors used a tiered approach to provide FAFSA completion and verification support, their students completed the FAFSA at higher rates. Furthermore, findings suggested that treatment counselors' participation in a collaborative learning community and training on FAFSA verification strategies were related to their students' higher FAFSA completion rates. These findings presented implications for relationships to literature, the theoretical framework, and practice, as well as opportunities for further research.

[1] This analysis on growth scores is the same as a paired-samples t-test.
[2] Glass's delta= - (.0621--.0244)/.07313.
[3] Glass's delta = (.2125-.1646)/.1220.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Problem of Practice

Introduction

Socioeconomically disadvantaged youth enter and complete college at much lower rates than their more affluent peers, which negatively impacts individuals and society (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Heckman, Lochner, & Todd, 2008; Kane & Rouse 1995; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). This chapter outlines existing literature on this problem and provides a rationale for why further research addressing this issue is warranted. From there, this chapter articulates a systems approach and theoretical framework for understanding the underlying causes and factors. Then, I synthesize the literature using key constructs from the theoretical framework, to organize the analysis. Finally, this chapter concludes with a rationale for the specific factors selected for empirical examination.

Problem of Practice

Nationally, there is significant socioeconomic and racial disparity in college attainment (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). A college education is a vehicle for social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006) and there are well-established economic returns on college attendance for society (Heckman et al., 2008; Kane & Rouse 1995). However, research demonstrates that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and students of color complete college at much lower rates than their more affluent and White peers (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Rosa, 2006). Income inequality will not change without significant increases in college attainment by youth from low-income backgrounds (Goldin & Katz, 2008). Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between educational attainment and life outcomes, including health, consumer choices, avoidance of criminal activity, and marital status (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002). Thus, college access and

attainment are imperative to decrease social and economic inequality (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Heckman et al., 2008; Kane & Rouse 1995).

College enrollment is a critical and foundational step on the path toward college completion. Advising from high school counselors and access to financial aid are primary factors in whether or not socioeconomically disadvantaged youth enroll in and complete college. The context of this study will be New Orleans public high schools. Similar to national trends, New Orleans public high school students, who are predominantly students of color from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, have lower college enrollment and persistence rates than their more affluent peers (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2018). Therefore, this dissertation will examine the extent to which advising delivered by New Orleans public high school counselors impacts their students' access to financial aid and college.

Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory

The theoretical framework for this dissertation is based on social capital theory. Coleman (1988) asserted: "Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (p. 98). Furthermore, social capital may be defined as the resources and information that flow through relationship ties such as personal relationships with family members, teachers, and counselors, as well as relationships with institutions such as schools and community organizations (Bourdieu,1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). Similarly, Ireland, Hitt, and Simon (2003) defined social capital as the internal and external relationships that allow for flow of goods and resources. Furthermore, Ireland et al. (2003) highlighted that trust is a foundational element of social capital.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) shed light on the role that schools play in reproducing inequalities in society through his examination of social capital and social reproduction theories.

According to Bourdieu (1986), middle- and upper- class students enter school with social assets, which provide them with advantages and promote social and economic mobility. Their social capital is then further developed within the school context, which leads already advantaged students to greater success (Bourdieu, 1986). The cycle continues and the divide becomes greater between poor and upper-income children (Bourdieu, 1986). On the other hand, research demonstrates that this cycle can be interrupted and reversed when less advantaged students access social capital through relationship ties (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001).

Expanding on this concept, Lin (2001) introduced school-based social capital as the social relationships and networks in schools, which can help improve students' life outcomes. Coleman (1988) provided an early examination of how school-based social capital can lead to increased human capital. Specifically, Coleman (1988) analyzed the impact of social capital on whether students stayed in high school or dropped out, and defined staying in high school as a measure of human capital formation. He found that school-based social capital—or the information that flows through relationship ties with school personnel—significantly impacted high school graduation. This study underscored how social capital can improve students' outcomes. In this dissertation, social capital theory creates a framework for understanding the types of information and resources high school counselors can provide for their students (Ireland et al., 2003; Lin, 2001; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

Literature Review of Factors Associated with Socioeconomic and Racial Disparity in College Enrollment

The following literature was gathered by searching databases, including Johns Hopkins University's Catalyst, ERIC, ProQuest, and JSTOR, along with search engines, such as Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed, empirical sources published in the last five years were given preference and the following search terms were used: college access, college attainment, college choice,

socioeconomically disadvantaged, low-income, counselors, college costs, and financial aid. Review of the literature led to identification of underlying causes and factors related to the Problem of Practice, and this review will provide a synthesis of those factors. Figure 1 graphically summarizes the factors discussed below.

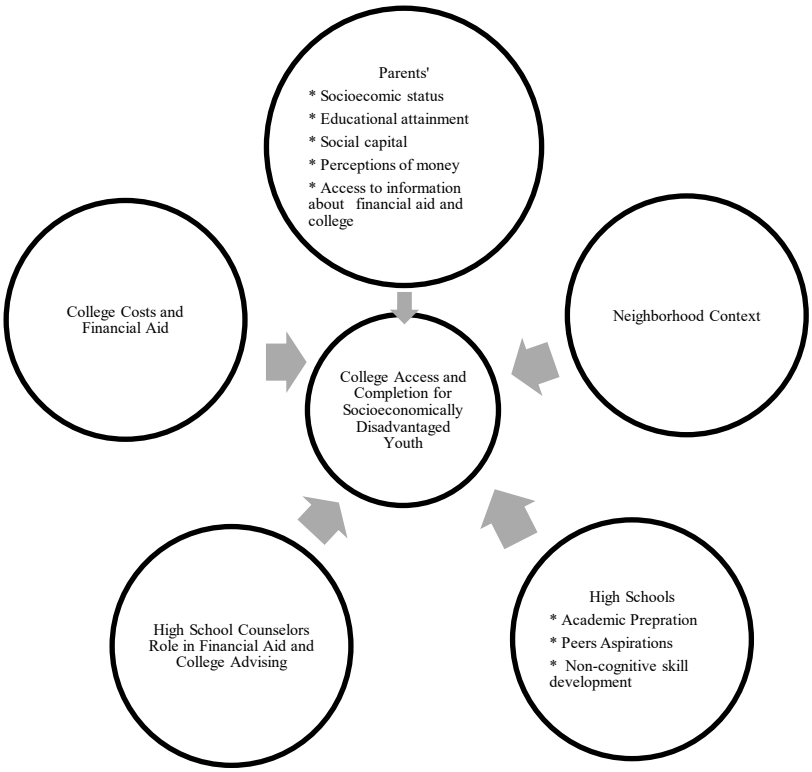

Figure 1.1. Conceptual framework.

Parents

Parents play an important role in their children's access to and success, or lack thereof, in college (Kim & Nuñez, 2013; Lareau, 2011; London, 1989; Perna & Titus, 2005). Anthropologist Annette Lareau (2011) stated, "one of the best predictors of whether a child will one day graduate from college is whether his or her parents are college graduates" (p. 21). Parents' educational attainment and income are key predictors of their children's college success

(Kim & Nuñez, 2013; London, 1989; Perna & Titus, 2005). Furthermore, social capital and social reproduction theories help to explain the important role parents play.

Using social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986) and social capital (Coleman, 1988) theories, anthropologist Annette Lareau (2011) presented a deep and rich qualitative study of 12 families, which illuminated differences in strategies employed by middle class and working class families. Lareau (2011) asserted that parents' social class and social capital have a powerful impact on their children. One such way is through *concerted cultivation*—a middle class style of parenting that fosters children's skills and talents through structured activities, and which gives these children tools to be successful in their futures (Lareau, 2011). This relates to social reproduction theory in that socioeconomic status is perpetuated by how parents raise their children.

Additionally, research indicates that parents of socioeconomically disadvantaged, first-generation college students are often less able to provide specific support for their children during the college application and financial aid process (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Nicols & Islas, 2016). Nichols and Islas (2016) analyzed social capital and its impact on college access and success for first-generation college-going students from low-income families. The researchers found that parents who had not gone to college were less likely to provide advice on college and resources for their children than parents who had attended college (Nicols & Islas, 2016). Additionally, parents' sociocultural interpretations of money and their limited access to relevant information about financial aid impacted whether or not their children accessed funding and attended college (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Rosa, 2006). The literature revealed that parents' educational attainment, income, social capital, perceptions of money, and knowledge of financial aid impacts their children's access to college. In addition to the paramount role parents play, the neighborhoods in which these families live influence young peoples' life outcomes.

Neighborhoods

One factor contributing to the lower college attainment rates among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth is neighborhood poverty (Evans, 2004; Fauth, 2004; Sharkey 2013). Research shows that neighborhood poverty impacts individuals' well-being and life outcomes (Evans, 2004; Fauth, 2004; Sharkey 2013). According to Sharkey (2013), neighborhood inequality can be passed down from generation to generation. Further, 66% of Black Americans who were born between 1985 and 2000 live in neighborhoods that are as poor or poorer than their parents did when they were growing up (Sharkey, 2013). In addition, according to Haveman and Smeeding (2006), "students in poor and minority neighborhoods are less well-prepared academically; ill prepared to select colleges, apply for admission, and secure acceptance; and poorly informed about the cost of attending college and the availability of needs-based financial aid" (p. 125). Moreover, one's neighborhood is an important social environment that reinforces class structures and can limit social mobility (Evans, 2004; Fauth, 2004; Sharkey 2013). Often within the context of neighborhoods, schools are a key environment that can impact students' college access and success or lack thereof.

High Schools

Bourdieu's (1986) social reproduction and social capital theories help explain how educational systems reinforce social inequality. High schools are a system of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001), which play a significant role in whether students enroll in, persist at, and complete college (Bausmith & France, 2012; Diemer & Li, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Sokatch, 2006). Additionally, Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011) found that students from low-income backgrounds who attend high schools with strong college-going cultures are more likely to enroll in college. Within the context of urban,

public high schools, key sub-factors include, but are not limited to: academic preparation, peers, non-cognitive skill development, and college-going culture.

Achievement gap and academic preparation. In the seminal *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report, Coleman et al. (1966) highlighted the achievement gap between White and Black students, low-income and higher-income students, and the negative impact of segregated schools. Unfortunately, since the Coleman Report's release, this achievement gap still exists, and has grown (Gamoran & Long, 2007; Lareau, 2011; Rury & Mirel, 1997). Furthermore, Kim and Nuñez (2013) found that academic preparation was the single most important predictor of college enrollment. However, academic preparation for Black and socioeconomically disadvantaged students is well behind that of White, Asian, and upper-income students (Kim & Nuñez, 2013). Additionally, research demonstrates that public high schools with high concentration of students from low-income families have less academic preparation than their more affluent peers (Gamoran & Long, 2007; Kim & Nuñez, 2013).

Peers. Within the larger context of high schools, peers are another important sub-factor. Peers influence one another's chances of attending and completing college (Harris, 2013; Roderick et al., 2011; Sokatch, 2006). Roderick et al. (2011) asserted that college attendance is influenced by whether "students have access to peers and networks that promote college attendance" (p. 188). Harris (2013) showed that students often make choices about colleges based on peers with whom they identify most closely. Additionally, Sokatch (2006) found that peers' aspirations are central predictor of four-year college enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds. Within the context of high schools, peers represent a key social relationship, which influences a young person's chance of accessing and succeeding in college.

Non-cognitive skill development. Non-cognitive skills are positively associated with college attainment (Close & Solberg, 2008; Duckworth, White, Matteucci, Shearer, & Gross, 2016; Garriott, Flores, & Martens, 2013). Within the context of high schools, teachers and counselors can play an important role in cultivating non-cognitive skills, such as resilience and self-efficacy, in students (Morales, 2014). Close and Solberg (2008) found that self-efficacy leads to increased student achievement and retention. Additionally, Duckworth et al. (2016) found that self-control and self-efficacy can have similar effects to socioeconomic status and intelligence on college attainment. These studies highlight the important relationship between non-cognitive skills and college success and point to potential interventions within high schools that could increase students' non-cognitive skills (Garriott et al., 2013; Morales, 2014; Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

College-going culture. Research indicates that initiatives employed within the high school environment can impact counselors' capacity to provide college and financial aid information with their students (Bausmith & France, 2012; Coleman, 1988; Diemer & Li, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Furthermore, high schools are a system of social reproduction and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001), both of which can play a role in whether students enroll in, persist at, and complete college (Bausmith & France, 2012; Diemer & Li, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Additionally, high schools with strong college-going cultures, defined as a school's resources and opportunities that encourage college enrollment (Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Roderick et al., 2011), can increase students' social capital (Coleman, 1988; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Therefore, it is important to consider high school contexts when exploring high school counselors' contact and information-sharing with students.

The seminal Coleman Report (1966) shed light on the importance of both school contexts and high school counselors. Since then, multiple studies have emphasized the relationships between high schools' college-going cultures and students' college access and enrollment (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Perna & Titus, 2005; Roderick et al., 2011). Roderick et al. (2011) analyzed to what degree indicators of college-going culture are associated with students' application to, enrollment in, and choice of four-year universities. They found that students from low-income backgrounds who attend high schools with strong college-going cultures are more likely to enroll in college (Roderick et al., 2011).

Additionally, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) analyzed data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS: 09) and utilized multiple regression and latent class analysis to determine factors related to a strong college-going culture. The researchers showed that college-going culture norms (e.g., average counselor caseloads) and resources (e.g., advanced courses and financial aid assistance) were significant factors in predicting college enrollment.

High school counselors. Research demonstrates that high school counselors are instrumental in advising their students through the college application and financial aid process (Holcomb-McCoy, Young, & Gonzalez, 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Rosa, 2006). Counselors are key drivers in whether or not students ultimately enroll and persist in college (Bausmith & France, 2012; Diemer & Li, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Unfortunately, public high schools in urban areas, with high populations of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, often lack systematic college access and readiness advising for students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Rosa, 2006). Additionally, counselors in those schools tend to have large caseloads, less training, more responsibilities and subsequently, are less able to provide necessary information and supports to families on financial aid (Diemer &

Li, 2012; Rosa, 2006). Furthermore, counselors' beliefs about what is possible for their students impact their students' ability to complete key college access milestones (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough, 2006; Rosa, 2006).

One factor that is crucial for counselor effectiveness is multicultural competence (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2010; Chao, 2013; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Wing Sue & Sue, 2008). The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Ethical Standards (2010) describes school counselors as "advocates who create opportunities for equity in access and success in educational opportunities" (p. 1). To provide equitable opportunities for college access, high school counselors should possess multicultural competence (Chao, 2013; Parikh et al., 2011).

According to Liberman (2013), multiculturalism underscores the importance of recognizing and honoring differences. Wing Sue and Sue (2008) presented a model of multicultural counseling competence (MCC). Within this model, the authors defined cultural competence as "an active, developmental, and ongoing process that is aspirational rather than achieved" and cultural humility as "respect and a lack of superiority toward an individual's cultural background and experience" (Wing Sue & Sue, 2008, p. 56). Chao (2013) showed that multicultural training can increase school counselors' MCC and change the association between race and MCC. Ensuring that counselors develop MCC is critical for all parts of their practice, including their important role advising their students' on their transition to postsecondary education.

College and Financial Aid Advising Delivered by High School Counselors

High school counselors play a key role in college financial aid advising. This section begins by outlining the evidence on the importance of financial aid to increase college

enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds. It then examines empirical studies of high school counselors' role in providing financial advising.

One of the biggest barriers to college enrollment and completion among low-income students is actual and perceived inability to afford college (St. John, 2002; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). Since the 1970s, the cost of college has risen at a much faster rate than median family wages (American Committee on Student Financial Assistance [ACSFA], 2010). However, often students with the most financial need are the least likely to take advantage of the financial aid options available to them (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003).

Financial Aid

Nationally, 25% of students who qualify for Pell grants do not apply for federal aid (Bresciani & Carson, 2002). Similarly, in Louisiana, the state in which the Problem of Practice is situated, Pell-eligible high school students did not access $43 million in Pell grant funds in 2013 (Sen-Gupta, 2013). One reason is that families often overestimate tuition amounts, causing them not to pursue financial aid or college (Horn, Chen, and Chapman, 2003). Similarly, McDonough and Calderone (2006) showed that parents' perceptions of affordability and financial aid impact whether or not their children attend college. Furthermore, Warnock (2016) presented that racial and income disparities explain differences in parents' perceptions of costs. Additionally, parents' lack of information about financial aid is another key barrier (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Rosa, 2006). As a result of these related barriers, socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are much less likely to enroll in, persist at, and complete college (St. John, 2002; St. John et al., 2005).

At the same time, need-based financial aid can be a mitigating factor (Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016)

found that providing students with additional need-based aid significantly increased their odds of degree attainment. Thus, research suggests that need-based aid can help to address the barrier of college costs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; St. John et al., 2005).

The FAFSA. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the primary vehicle through which students can access need-based financial aid and it is associated with college enrollment and persistence for disadvantaged youth (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; McDonough, 2006; Roderick et al., 2011; Rosa, 2006). On a national level, students in the lowest economic quintile who complete the FAFSA are 127% more likely to enter college than students who do not (DeBaun, 2018). Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmastu (2009) found that when socioeconomically disadvantaged students were provided support on completing the FAFSA, they were more likely to enroll in college. In summary, college costs are a key barrier to enrollment for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Rosa, 2006) and the FAFSA can be a vehicle through which students can access financial aid to overcome this barrier (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; McDonough, 2006; Rosa, 2006).

High School Counselors' Support for Students

In an illuminating study, Holcomb-McCoy (2010) examined school counselors' beliefs regarding involving parents in the college admission process. Holcomb-McCoy (2010) surveyed 22 counselors from across four school districts, using the counselor version of the College Preparation Questionnaire. Holcomb-McCoy (2010) asserted that students from high-poverty backgrounds benefit significantly when their college counselors involve and inform their parents about the college application process and financial aid. Furthermore, after analyzing the survey data, Holcomb-McCoy (2010) found that while counselors believe that providing parents

information on college and financial aid is important, they do not spend sufficient time interacting with parents or sharing relevant information.

Two additional studies, one quantitative and the other qualitative, also shed light on the construct of college and financial aid advising delivered by high school counselors. In their quantitative study, Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, and Holcomb-McCoy (2011) used social capital theory as a framework and analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (Ingels, Pratt, Rogers, Siegel, & Stutts, 2004) to examine if the ways high school counselors contacted and shared information with their students influenced college application rates. In their qualitative study, McDonough and Calderone (2006) used sociocultural theory and the concept of habitus to analyze trends from interviews and focus groups with counselors from urban high schools who work with socioeconomically disadvantaged families.

Bryan et al. (2011) examined whether students' contact with school counselors and the information about college counselors shared served as a source of social capital for students in the college application process. McDonough and Calderone (2006) sought to understand how counselors' knowledge of college costs and financial aid, and their assumptions about families' perceptions of financial aid, impacted the college information they shared with their students and families. These studies were similar in that their research questions both aimed to uncover how the information counselors shared impacted students' college and financial aid access.

The studies were different in their methods and in how they measured and analyzed constructs. Bryan et al.'s (2011) methods flowed logically from their theoretical framework and research question. They analyzed data from a representative sample of 4,835 high school seniors from public schools across the United States pulled from the ELS:2002 database. The researchers examined applying to college as the dependent variable and student-counselor contact about

college information, number of counselors at a given high school, gender, race/ethnicity, postsecondary aspirations, mother's postsecondary expectations, SES, academic achievement, parental involvement, free and reduced lunch, and school size as the independent variables. Bryan et al. (2011) conducted multinomial logistic regression and post hoc interaction analyses to determine the effects of each aforementioned independent variable on the dependent variable, applying to college. On the other hand, McDonough and Calderone (2006) examined transcripts from interviews and focus groups with counselors from 14 Southern California high schools. These interviews and focus groups lasted for one to two hours each. There were 20 counselors interviewed individually and 43 interviewed through a focus group.

Though their approaches were different, the studies by Bryan et al. (2011) and McDonough and Calderone (2006) had similar findings. Bryan et al. (2011) found that gender, academic achievement, parental involvement, school size, and number of counselors at a school were significant predictors of students applying to one or more colleges. Additionally, they found that student-counselor contact about college by 10th grade gave students a significant advantage in the college application process. McDonough and Calderone (2006) determined conceptual themes through analyzing counselor interview and focus group transcripts. They found that counselors' information-sharing about college and financial aid, perceptions of students' and families' views about college affordability and money, and perceptions of Black and Latino parents' concerns about loans all impacted students' access to financial aid and college.

Robinson and Roksa (2016) used social capital theory to identify counselor contact as a key factor worthy of exploration, as did Bryan et al. (2011). Like Bryan et al. (2016), Robinson and Roksa (2016) also examined ELS: 2002 data. They found that meeting with a counselor

either just in the 12th grade or in both the 10th and 12th grade were significantly associated with an increase in the likelihood of applying to 2-year and 4-year institutions. However, for students enrolling in 4-year institutions, meeting with a counselor in both 10th and 12th was more beneficial than seeing a counselor just in 12th grade. Overall, Robinson and Roksa (2016) found that consulting with a counselor played a significant role in predicting students' applications to college. These findings underscored the importance of high school counselor contact and information-sharing with their students. One limitation of this study was that it did not assess the quality of the counselor-student interactions.

Ultimately, these studies affirmed that high school counselors play a critical role in advising their students through the college application and financial aid processes. A noteworthy common finding was the importance of counselor-student contact and college information sharing. Although Bryan et al. (2011) found that this contact was significant, they acknowledged that further research was needed to examine the dynamics of counselor-student interaction as well as the potential impact of counselor perceptions and dispositions on the postsecondary decisions of students. While McDonough and Calderone's (2006) study examined counselors' perceptions, they suggested a need for additional study of the sociocultural gaps between counselors and families. The findings and limitations of these studies point to the need for further research on college and financial aid advising delivered by high school counselors, which provides rationale for the selected factors for this dissertation and empirical study.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has summarized evidence of the problem of lower college enrollment and attainment rates of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth and situated the problem within the theoretical framework of social capital. Analysis of the literature identified many factors

associated with this problem, including students' high-poverty neighborhoods, families and peer networks with limited experience attending college, and high schools that do not prepare students academically for college or provide a college-going culture. The chapter focused on the importance of high school counselors in providing social capital to students in the college application process. Specifically, it focused on the critical role counselors can play in financial aid advising, which is a more malleable barrier to college enrollment compared to others. However, there is limited research on financial aid advising delivered by high school counselors. Moreover, the studies that do exist suggest a need for further research (Bryan et al., 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Thus, Chapter 2 will present a needs assessment that examines financial aid advising by high school counselors in New Orleans.

Chapter 2: Needs Assessment

As a means of understanding the national problem outlined in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 focuses on New Orleans high school counselors' roles in supporting FAFSA form completion for New Orleans public high school seniors. The research-based factors related to low college enrollment rates, particularly families' financial circumstances and social capital, can be addressed through more effective college financial advising by high school counselors, and specifically through counselors' help in ensuring higher FAFSA completion rates. The needs assessment explores challenges faced by New Orleans high school counselors as they support their students' completion of the FAFSA.

Context of the Study

The context of the study was New Orleans public high schools. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused widespread destruction in New Orleans and dramatically impacted the city's students, teachers, families, and school system (Hill & Hannaway, 2006; Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). Schools did not re-open until 2006 and due to school district bankruptcy, over 4000 local educators lost their jobs and had to re-apply for new ones (Hill & Hannaway, 2006; Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). Additionally, the Louisiana Legislature voted to have the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) take over low-performing public schools in New Orleans, which resulted in a statewide takeover of more than 90% of the city's public schools. That takeover led to the proliferation of public charter schools and New Orleans having the most decentralized public school system in the country (Hill & Hannaway, 2006; Sims & Rossmeier, 2015).

At the time when this needs assessment was conducted, New Orleans was a 92% charter district with schools operating under various charter management organizations and authorizing bodies (Louisiana Department of Education Public School Enrollment and Demographics

Report, 2016). This decentralized system presents benefits and challenges. One particularly relevant challenge is that there is not clear coordination or alignment between high schools on college readiness or financial aid support for students.

The average racial composition of high schools in New Orleans at the time of the needs assessment was 87% Black and 84% economically disadvantaged students (Louisiana Department of Education Public, 2016). There were 20 high schools in New Orleans serving approximately 3,100 high school seniors.

The national problem described in Chapter 1 manifests within the context of professional practice. In Louisiana, Pell-eligible high school students did not access $43 million in Pell grant funds in 2013 because they did not complete the FAFSA (Sen-Gupta, 2015). As of April 21, 2017, the FAFSA completion rate for New Orleans public high school students was only 54%, which was below the national average (US Department of Education FAFSA Reports, 2017).

In response, beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, Louisiana high school seniors were required to either complete the FAFSA, apply for the Louisiana Taylor Opportunity Program Scholarship (TOPS), or complete a waiver in order to graduate from high school (Louisiana Department of Education, 2015). This policy created an opportunity to increase financial aid completion in Louisiana. However, this policy also presented challenges. For example, not all New Orleans high school students were on the path to post-secondary education. To address this, the waiver option provided an alternative for students who were planning to pursue a myriad of other paths outside of college. Additionally, adhering to this policy would be a considerable undertaking for the counselors, families, and students of New Orleans given the relatively low FAFSA completion rates at the time of the needs assessment (US Department of Education, 2017). In addition, the Louisiana policy tracked FAFSA submission, not completion (Louisiana

Department of Education, 2015). This meant that students who were selected for verification might not complete the FAFSA, and thus might not access federal aid. This presented an opportunity to provide support for high school counselors in their implementation of the policy.

The specific setting of the needs assessment was a counseling training series delivered by the Cowen Institute at Tulane University. This training series aimed to foster collaboration and college access information-sharing among New Orleans high school counselors. It was a voluntary professional development opportunity where counselors opted in to participate. In the 2016-2017 school year, there were 16 participating counselors, representing 12 of the city's public high schools.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of this needs assessment was to understand the challenges facing New Orleans high school counselors with respect to their college financial aid advising. In particular, it sought to explore counselors' perceptions about financial aid advising and to what degree their experience and practices, such as capacity (e.g., training, time, caseloads, and resources), contact with students and families, and beliefs about their responsibility to support students in completing the FAFSA, indicated areas where interventions might be most beneficial to help improve their students' FAFSA completion rates.

Research Questions

Several research questions guided this needs assessment:

RQ1: How do high school counselors rate their capacity —including training, caseloads, time, and resources—for supporting their students' FAFSA completion?

RQ2: How much contact do high school counselors report with students and their families related to their students' FAFSA completion?

RQ3: What are high school counselors' beliefs about their own responsibility to support their students' FAFSA completion?

RQ4: To what degree are FAFSA completion rates related to school performance?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this needs assessment were New Orleans public high school counselors who were invited to participate because of their involvement in the counseling training series. Nine counselors out of 16 counselors in the group responded to the optional survey, for a 56% response rate. These nine counselors represented seven participating high schools. Demographically, 66.7% of participants identified as Black, 22.2% identified as White, and 11.1% identified as other. In terms of gender, 77.7% identified as female and 22.2% identified as male. Of respondents 22.2% had 10 or more years of experience, 55.6% had three to five years of experience, and 22.2% had two or less years of experience. The average racial make-up of the high schools in the needs assessment was 85% Black. Economically disadvantaged students comprised 84% of these high schools (Louisiana Department of Education Public School Enrollment and Demographics Report, 2016). Student demographic data can be viewed in Table 2.1.

Table 1.1

Racial Distribution of Students

High School	Black	White	Asian	Hispanic
School A	92%	.5%	0%	7%
School B	83%	8%	2%	4%
School C	97%	0%	1%	2%
School D	88%	3%	2%	7%
School E	98%	1%	%	1%
School F	26%	56%	4%	8%
School G	84%	3%	1%	12%
Average Across Participating Schools	85% Black (Predominant Group)			

Measures

The following section details the sets of variables central to this needs assessment.

FAFSA completion. School-level FAFSA form completion rates were calculated using data from FAFSA completion reports, which the U.S. Department of Education releases by high school each week (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), along with the Louisiana Department of Education's Student Enrollment Count for each high school (Louisiana Department of Education, 2017).

Counselor variables. This needs assessment examined counselor variables, including capacity such as time, resources, caseloads, and experience (Diemer & Li, 2012; Rosa, 2006); contact and information-sharing with students and families (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006); and beliefs about their own responsibilities to support their students in completing the FAFSA (Bryan et al., 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; McDonough & Calderone,

2006). These counselor variables were measured using Likert-type items, which were developed for this study and administered through a survey instrument. The survey questions were based on the research literature on financial aid advising delivered by high school counselors (Bryan et al., 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Additionally, the survey gathered demographic data on counselors. The complete survey instrument is included as Appendix A.

School variables. School quality was measured by the 2016 school letter grades assigned to schools by the Louisiana Department of Education, based on student performance on assessments. Other school variables included: school size, 12th grade enrollment, school counselor to student ratios, and student demographics.

Data collection methods. Sixteen counselors, who are members of the counselor training series were invited through email to complete an optional online survey using the Survey Monkey platform. Counselors received the email invitation in early April 2017 and a follow-up email in mid-April 2017. Nine counselors completed this survey online using the Survey Monkey platform. School-level data, including FAFSA completion data, student enrollment counts, and student demographic data, were collected by examining the Louisiana Department of Education 12th Grade February Enrollment Counts and the U.S. Department of Education FAFSA Reports. The data are summarized in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

School Data

School Name	Letter Grade	FAFSA Completion Rate	Number of Participating Counselors/ Total Counselors
School A	D	69%	1/1
School B	C	55%	1/1
School C	A	78%	3/3
School D	D	48%	1/1
School E	C	38%	1/1
School F	A	77%	1/1
School G	C	49%	1/1

Data analysis. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures. Analyses using Spearman's rho were also conducted to measure the strength of relationships between variables, although the small sample size limits conclusions that can be drawn from those analyses. Tables are included in Appendix B.

Findings and Discussion

FAFSA Completion

As of April 21, 2017, FAFSA completion rates for each of the study high schools ranged from 38% to 78%, with a mean of 63% and median of 69%. The average FAFSA completion rate at this study's high schools was higher than the citywide rate of 54%, with only three out of nine high schools lower than the citywide average (see Table 2.2). Therefore, it is important to note that survey findings from schools with higher FAFSA rates may not be representative of the experience of all New Orleans high school counselors. Descriptive statistics of respondents' students' FAFSA completion rates can be viewed in Appendix C. Findings are organized below

under each research question. Given the small sample, these results should be regarded as preliminary and interpreted with caution.

Research question 1. To what degree is the capacity of high school counselors—including training, caseloads, time, and resources—related to their students' FAFSA completion?

Capacity. Regarding training, nearly 90% of counselors believed they had received the training they needed to support students in completing the FAFSA. Counselors were less likely to report that they had sufficient resources and time. Fewer than half (44.4%) agreed they had the "tools and resources needed to support students in completing the FAFSA," and fewer than one in four (22.2%) agreed they had the time needed. These findings affirm the research that time is a barrier for counselors (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Rosa, 2006). Survey responses related to capacity can be viewed in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3

Capacity

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have the time I need to support students in completing the FAFSA.	0%	22.2%	22.2%	33.3%	22.2%
I have the tools and resources I need to support students in completing the FAFSA.	11.1%	44.4%	33.3%	11.1%	0%

Research question 2. To what degree are high school counselors' contact with students and their families related to their students' FAFSA completion?

Contact. This needs assessment gauged counselors' perception of their contact with students and families related to the FAFSA. Interestingly, 22.2% of participants strongly disagreed that they make sure that every student in their caseload has one-on-one support on the

FAFSA, which suggests a need for further investigation. Regarding hosting FAFSA information and completion events for families, one-fourth expressed that they do this more than three times a year, one-half expressed they do this once or more than once a year, and the remaining fourth said they never do this.

Because research suggests that targeted text messages can increase completion of college access milestones (Castleman, 2014), counselors were asked whether they used text messages to share information about the FAFSA. In this study, nearly 90% of participants responded that they do not use text messages to share information about the FAFSA. Survey responses related to contact can be viewed in Table 2.4.

Research question 3. To what degree are high school counselors' beliefs about their own responsibility to support their students related to FAFSA completion?

Responsibility. In response to the survey, almost 90% agreed or strongly agreed that it is their responsibility to support their students in completing the FAFSA and 11.1% responded neutrally. Additionally, 22.2% agreed, 33.3% were neutral, and 44.4% disagreed that it is the parent and students' responsibility to complete the FAFSA, not the counselors' responsibility. Furthermore, nearly 90% of participants agreed that it is their responsibility to support students in completing the FAFSA. Survey responses related to responsibility can be viewed in Table 2.5.

Table 2.4

Contact

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I make sure that every one of the seniors in my caseload has one-on-one support on the FAFSA.	22.2%	11.1%	11.1%	55.6%%	0%
	3 or more times	2 times	Once	Never	
I hold FAFSA information and completion events for students' families.	22.2%	33.3%	22.2%	22.2%	
	Yes		No		
We have a peer mentorship program in place to support students' completion of college access milestones (such as college applications and the FAFSA).	55.6%		44.4%		
We use a text message system (such as Signal Vine) to notify students and parents about the FAFSA.	11.1%		88.9%		

Table 2.5

Responsibility

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I believe counselors should work with students and their families to complete the FAFSA.	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%	0%	0%
It is my responsibility to support students in completing the FAFSA.	44.4%	44.4%	0%	11.1%	0%
I am satisfied with the FAFSA completion rate at my school.	0%	44.4%	11.1%	22.2%	22.2%
I know the FAFSA completion rate at my school.	100%*				
Ultimately, it is the student and parent's responsibility whether they complete and submit the FAFSA, not mine.	0%	22.2%	33.3%	44.4%	0%

Note. *100% between Strongly Agree and Agree.

Research question 4. To what degree are FAFSA completion rates related to school performance?

School performance. A Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was run to determine the relationship between FAFSA completion and aforementioned school variables. This correlation table can be found in Appendix B. There was a positive correlation between school performance score and FAFSA completion ($r_s(8) = .738$, $p = .023$). This indicates that the higher the school's academic performance, the more likely students are to complete the FAFSA. Although analyses of individual student-level data are needed to confirm this, students with higher academic performance are probably more likely to complete the FAFSA than students who have not been

successful academically.

Conclusion

This needs assessment examined the Problem of Practice in the context of New Orleans, narrowing in on high school counselors' role in supporting their students' FAFSA completion. Key needs emerged from this assessment. It appears that there is a need to increase counselors' capacity to support students on the FAFSA as well as a need to increase counselors' contact with students and families. Chapter 3 will review literature on relevant interventions.

Chapter 3: Intervention Literature Review

Introduction

Building on the needs assessment findings, Chapter 3 utilizes social capital theory and sociocultural theory as theoretical frameworks to examine the intervention literature. The first portion of this chapter uses social capital theory to examine literature describing effective interventions to improve FAFSA completion support. The second part of this chapter uses sociocultural theory to review literature on professional learning, which will be the mechanism for delivering the intervention with high school counselors. Finally, drawing from elements of the interventions reviewed, this chapter concludes with an overview of the proposed intervention, which focuses on equipping counselors with the tools to efficiently provide comprehensive FAFSA support.

Evident in the needs assessment is that many counselors do not perceive themselves to have sufficient resources and time to support their students in completing the FAFSA. Additionally, the needs assessment found that counselors in the study did not have sufficient contact with their students. These findings echoed national research findings about how counselors' limited capacity in time and resources affects their ability to provide information and support to their students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Rosa, 2006) and specifically to support their students' completion of the FAFSA (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2015; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Rosa, 2006). Furthermore, these findings provide the rationale for a literature review of potential interventions.

Conceptual Framework for Interventions to Increase FAFSA Completion

Building on the discussion of social capital theory in Chapter 1, this chapter presents a conceptual framework (Figure 3.1) describing how high school counselors can provide social capital to their students through sharing information about the financial aid application process. Research demonstrates that social capital is not equitably distributed, and lack of information is a key barrier for college and financial aid access (Perna & Titus, 2005; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Socioeconomically disadvantaged students, first-generation college-goers, and Black students often do not have access to the social capital that more affluent, continuing generation, and White students have (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; London, 1989; Owen & Westlund, 2016; Perna & Titus, 2005; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

On the other hand, several studies have shown that high school counselors can mitigate this inequity by providing social capital through guidance and information-sharing, particularly related to financial aid (Bryan et al., 2011; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Robinson and Roksa (2016) aptly asserted: "access to social capital is crucial for students and their parents in navigating the college application process. Research has shown that the more students and parents know about college in general and more specifically about financial aid, the more likely students are to enroll in higher education" (p. 847).

High school counselors can play a key role as agents of social capital—purveyors of resources and information about the college application process (Bryan et al., 2011; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). However, unfortunately, the needs assessment and existing research uncovered that counselors often have limited contact and capacity to play this important role (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Owen & Westlund, 2016; Rosa, 2006). Therefore, this conceptual framework uses social capital theory to examine various forms of contact and information-

sharing counselors can use to increase students' access to financial aid and college. Because the findings reported in Chapters 1 and 2 revealed the need to increase high school counselors' capacity and contact with students and their students' families, particularly around information-sharing about the financial aid process (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Owen & Westlund, 2016; Rosa, 2006), this chapter will provide a synthesis of literature that addresses how this might be accomplished through counselor contact and information-sharing, targeted FAFSA support, and comprehensive FAFSA outreach.

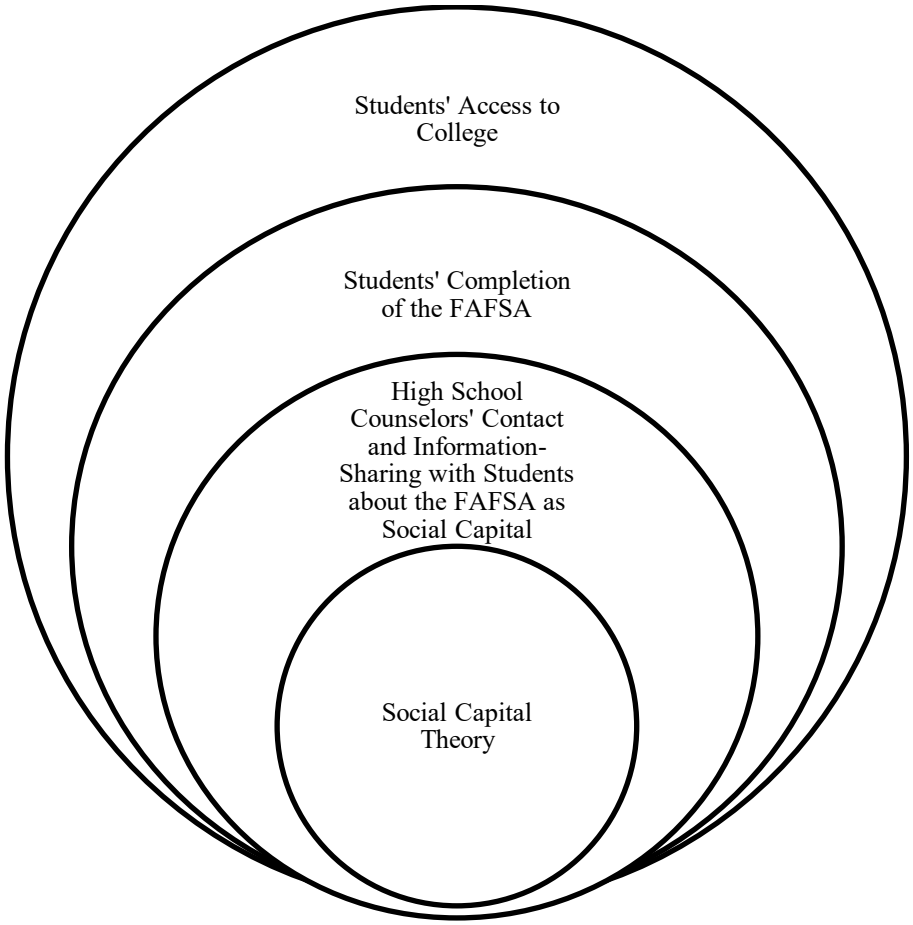

Figure 3.1. Conceptual framework.

Synthesis of Intervention Literature

Counselor Contact and Information-Sharing

High school counselors' contact and information-sharing with their students is a form of social capital, which can help influence FAFSA completion and college enrollment (Bryan et al., 2011; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). As outlined in Chapter 1, three studies provided unique lenses on counselor contact and information-sharing (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). These studies affirmed that high school counselors provide important social capital through advising their students on college application and financial aid processes (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). A particular thread between these studies was the importance of counselor-student contact as a mechanism for increasing students' social capital related to the financial aid and college application processes. These findings have led me to focus on helping counselors increase their contact and information-sharing with students and families as central components of the intervention.

Targeted FAFSA Support

A review of literature reveals that targeted FAFSA support can increase FAFSA completion, college enrollment, and college completion (Bettinger, Long, & Oreopoulos, 2013; Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015; Page and Castleman, 2016). Targeted support can take various forms, including providing additional assistance from outside of the school and using text messaging to encourage completion.

Targeted FAFSA support through additional assistance. Bettinger et al. (2013) implemented an intervention with H&R Block, where low-to moderate-income families were offered free additional assistance in completing the FAFSA immediately after they completed

their taxes. Accountants used participants' tax information to pre-populate the FAFSA form and then supported them in completing the rest of the application. Participants were also given an estimate of their eligibility for government aid as well as information about postsecondary options. This intervention increased college enrollment rates by 30% among high school seniors. These noteworthy results underscore the importance of targeted FAFSA-completion support.

After releasing their study, Bettinger et al. (2013) worked in partnership with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the U.S. Department of Education to launch the College Assistance Program (CAP) and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program to provide free tax preparation and FAFSA completion support across the United States. This intervention provided families with social capital, access to information, and support, which led to significant increases in FAFSA completion and college enrollment (Bettinger, et al., 2013).

Similar to Bettinger et al. (2013), Camizzi, Clark, Yacco, and Goodman's (2009) study offered an example of a targeted FAFSA completion intervention. The researchers implemented a financial aid experiment with district supervisors, school counselors, and graduate student interns in a Florida public school district. Data were used to identify high-achieving students with financial need. The intervention included assisting these identified students with support on financial aid and scholarship applications. First, the practitioners informed the entire senior class about scholarship application procedures. Then, they provided a group of 83 seniors, who were identified as having a GPA of 2.5 or higher and qualified for the free or reduced-price lunch program, with targeted FAFSA outreach and support. This intervention led to significant increases in attendance at FAFSA events as well as in FAFSA completion. In sum, these studies underscored the importance of targeted FAFSA support and provided examples of potential interventions (Bettinger et al., 2013; Camizzi et al., 2009). It is worth noting that the targeted

support described in the studies above was in addition to high school counselors' time and included extra resources. As such, providing additional resources to counselors and supporting them in working more efficiently will be key components of the intervention.

Targeted FAFSA support through text messaging. Text messaging is another form of targeted FAFSA support (Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015; Page et al., 2016). To mitigate the challenge of counselors' limited capacity, targeted text messages can efficiently increase counselors contact with students related to financial aid and college application processes (Bird, et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that targeted text messages can increase FAFSA completion (Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015; Page, Castleman, & Meyer, 2016). Additionally, text messages sent to students about the FAFSA can lead to significant improvements in college enrollment and persistence (Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015; Page and Castleman, 2016). Bird et al. (2017) conducted a randomized controlled trial with over 450,000 high school seniors. They found that providing students with concrete planning prompts about when and how to complete the FAFSA led to significant increases in college enrollment. Students who received planning prompts were more likely to enroll in college than students in a control group that received several general emails about completing the FAFSA. These planning prompts provided social capital through conveying information about the financial aid process (Bird et al., 2017).

Additionally, counselors can use alternative and more efficient means of contact, such as text messages, to provide behavior-specific praise to encourage their students to complete the FAFSA as well as other important college access milestones (Bird et al., 2017). Behavior-specific praise is more effective than generalized praise in shaping behavior (Bird et al., 2017; Dweck, 2008; Hardiman, 2012). Furthermore, behavior-specific praise can cultivate trust

(Dweck, 2008), which is a foundational element of social capital (Ireland et al., 2003). For example, high school counselors can encourage FAFSA completion by using behavior-specific praise in person or via text message. This text message provides an example of using behavior-specific praise: "You're the kind of student who cares about their future: that's why you applied to college. Now take action to control your financial future—submit the FAFSA" (Bird et al., 2017, p. 7). In summary, text messaging is an evidence-based intervention (Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015; Page and Castleman, 2016), which can help to mitigate counselors' limited contact with students regarding FAFSA completion and can increase students' social capital.

Comprehensive FAFSA Outreach using a Tiered Approach

Owen and Westlund (2016) studied how high school counselors provided comprehensive outreach and supported students and families as they navigated the financial aid process using a tiered approach. They engaged 75 high school counselors from across a large southwestern urban U.S. school district. The sample for this study comprised 8,655 high school graduates across 21 high schools over 2 years. Cohorts were similar in size, with 4,365 graduates in the 2010 control group and 4,290 graduates in the 2011 treatment group. All high school counselors in the district participated in a three-hour training from the U.S. Department of Education. Counselors learned about FAFSA filing options and the Estimated Family Contribution (EFC). Then, they completed a full FAFSA on the FAFSA demo test site.

The school district set up centers in computer labs at fourteen high schools, where parents and students could ask questions and complete the FAFSA. Each of these high schools hosted at least eight FAFSA completion events between February and March. When requested, counselors also provided one-on-one FAFSA support to students and parents. The school district submitted

names, birthdates, and zip codes for the graduating seniors in 2010 and 2011 to the Department of Education. The Department of Education then matched each student's information to their FAFSA record and returned students' FAFSA completion status to the district.

FAFSA completion rates post-intervention were 10 percentage points higher than they were before the intervention. Additionally, college attendance rates post-intervention were 11 percentage points higher than pre-intervention. Both of these effects are statistically significant. This study adds value to the field; however, one threat to validity was that this research compared students without access to the intervention (2010 graduates) to students with access to the intervention (2011 graduates). If there were other notable differences between those graduating cohorts, this could compromise validity. Nonetheless, this study provides an example of a promising intervention to implement with New Orleans public high schools.

Another example of comprehensive FAFSA support can be found in a study about the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant (Erisman & Steele, 2018). This initiative engaged 22 cities during the 2016-17 school year and was supported by the Kresge Foundation and the National College Access Network (NCAN). In their report, Erisman and Steele (2018) presented lessons learned about effective comprehensive FAFSA support from these 22 cities. Key strategies included using a tiered approach to supporting FAFSA completion, such as raising awareness through text messaging and other communications efforts, leveraging community support, hosting FAFSA completion events, using individual FAFSA completion reports to provide tiered interventions, and providing individualized FAFSA completion support. These strategies relate to the components of Owen and Westlund's (2016) intervention and provide a framework for the current intervention: comprehensive FAFSA support using a tiered approach.

FAFSA Submission Versus Completion: The Verification Issue

One issue that has not received sufficient attention in the literature on interventions to increase FAFSA completion is the need for those providing FAFSA support to understand the importance of helping students through another barrier in the process: verification. The U.S. Department of Education uses FAFSA verification as a review process to prevent improper financial aid payments (DeBaun, 2018). Each year, the Department of Education selects millions of applications for verification. Universities are required to validate the information submitted by students selected for verification. The extra step of verification, is time-consuming and often ends up hindering financial aid access for students who need it most (DeBaun, 2018). Furthermore, verification disproportionately impacts students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Babineau, 2018; Hoover, 2017; Page et al., 2016). Of applicants flagged for verification, 98% are from Pell-eligible families (Hoover, 2017). "For the most vulnerable students, the line between enrolling and not enrolling, graduating and dropping out, is already thin. Verification difficulties push some people right over that line" (Hoover, 2017).

Additionally, students from low-income backgrounds often experience verification melt (DeBaun, 2018). Verification melt refers to when students do not take the required steps to verify their FAFSA and, as a result, do not access financial aid (DeBaun, 2018). DeBaun (2018) estimated that the rate of verification melt climbed to 25% in 2017, representing approximately 104,000 socioeconomically-disadvantaged high school seniors. Nationally, and in New Orleans, verification remains one of the biggest challenges to FAFSA completion (Babineau, 2018; Mulhere, 2017; "NASFAA issue brief verification," 2018; Page et al., 2016). The review of literature did not uncover interventions that made training for counselors about FAFSA verification an explicit part of the FAFSA assistance process. Given the importance of this

challenge in the FAFSA completion process, a key component of this intervention will include training counselors on the difference between FAFSA submission and completion, and how to overcome the hurdles of verification selection.

Summary

In summary, the studies reviewed provide insight on counselor contact and information-sharing, targeted FAFSA support, comprehensive outreach to increase FAFSA completion, and understanding how to support students who are selected for verification. In order to equip counselors with the resources to efficiently implement comprehensive FAFSA support through a tiered approach, the proposed intervention will focus on professional development for counselors. To set the context for the professional development intervention aimed at equipping counselors to more effectively provide financial aid support to students and families, the next section reviews sociocultural theory and literature on professional learning.

Theoretical Framework for Professional Learning

In this section of the chapter, sociocultural theory will be used as a theoretical framework to review literature on professional learning. Sociocultural theory holds that knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Raphael, Vasquez, Fortune, Gavelek, & Au, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). The Vygotsky Space helps to explain sociocultural theory and sociocultural approaches to professional development (Raphael et al., 2014). The Vygotsky Space contains four quadrants (QI-QIV) with one continuum from social to individual learning and a second continuum from public to private displays of learning (Raphael et al., 2014). Learning within the Vygotsky Space is iterative and educators move from appropriation, to transformation, to publication, to conventionalization of new ideas and practices (Raphael et al., 2014). An illustration of the Vygotsky Space can be viewed in Figure 3.2.

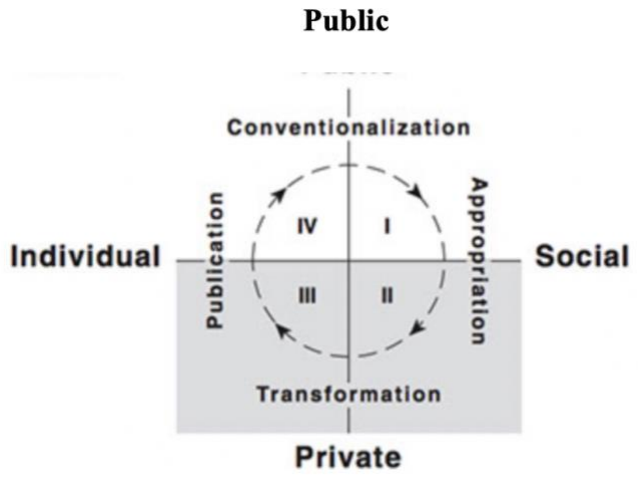

Figure 3.2. The Vygotsky Space.

Five principles of professional development emerge from sociocultural theory: educator agency, situated learning, dialogical practice, systemic view, and sustained duration (Raphael et al., 2014). Agency means that educators have ownership of the reform efforts and professional development in which they engage, which encourages educators to interact with others, internalize and apply new strategies within their contexts, and ultimately transform their thoughts and practices (Raphael et al., 2014). The second principle of sociocultural approaches to professional development is that learning must be situated around problems of practice that are meaningful to educators. The third principle is that dialogue is essential for educators to move through the four quadrants of the Vygotsky Space. The fourth principle of the sociocultural approach is that professional development should be systemic, engaging all key participants from the start and uniting them around a common purpose. The fifth principle is that professional learning needs to be sustained over a period of time (Raphael et al., 2014). Sociocultural theory provides a framework for this review of literature and professional learning proposal.

Review of Professional Learning Intervention Literature

The following review of literature draws from sociocultural theory and provides a rationale for this professional learning intervention. Research shows that professional learning is at the heart of high-performing education systems (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Jensen, Sonneman, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016; Learning Forward, 2011). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reviewed 35 studies that demonstrated a positive link between professional development and student outcomes. From those studies, they identified seven common characteristics of effective professional development, which include: content-focus, active learning, collaboration, models of effective practice, coaching, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Similarly, Desimone and Garet (2015) outlined the following five essential components of effective professional development: content focus, active learning, coherence, sustained duration, and collective participation. Additionally, Learning Forward's (2011) standards "call for professional learning that is ongoing, embedded, connected to practice, aligned to school and district goals, and collaborative" (Calvert, 2016, p. 3). Based on this research, key features of high-quality professional learning include: agency (Calvert, 2016; Raphael et al., 2014); active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015); collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015); and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Raphael et al., 2014).

Key Features of High Quality Professional Learning

Agency. Agency is a central concept within sociocultural theory and a key component of effective professional development (Raphael et al., 2014). Calvert (2016) defined agency as "the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and

contribute to the growth of their colleagues" (p. 3). The extent to which a practitioner engages in agency-centered professional learning depends on internal factors such as motivation and the degree to which a school or system involves educators in decision-making about their learning (Calvert, 2016).

In order to encourage agency, certain supports need to be in place (Calvert, 2016). Calvert (2016) outlined seven steps that school leaders can take to increase agency within their contexts. First, schools should make all decisions about professional learning with meaningful consultation from educators. Second, schools should reorganize their schedules so that educators have time to plan and collaborate with their colleagues. Third, teachers should analyze data to identify teaching and learning challenges. Fourth, educators should engage in learning communities where they can solve problems of practice. Fifth, schools should provide teachers with choices about what and with whom they learn professionally. Sixth, continuous growth, not evaluation, should be the purpose of professional learning. And, finally, professional learning should be context-specific. These seven steps create conditions that encourage educators' agency and ownership of their professional learning.

Active learning. Active learning is another key component of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Learning Forward, 2011). Learning Forward's (2011) standards for professional learning assert that learning designs should incorporate theories of adult learning to achieve intended outcomes. In particular, an active learning design creates opportunities for teachers "to observe, receive feedback, analyze student work, or make presentations, as opposed to passively listening to lectures" (Desimone & Garet, 2015, p. 253). According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), professional development designs should incorporate active learning. In Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) research on 35

effective professional learning settings, multiple studies had educators engage as participants in the same type of activities that they would later use with their students.

Active learning aligns with sociocultural theory (Raphael et al., 2014). According to Raphael et al. (2014), dialogical practice is central to a sociocultural approach to professional learning. Moreover, through conversation with colleagues and experts, feedback, and reflection, educators are able to move along the Vygotsky Space from appropriation, to transformation, to publication, to conventionalization of new ideas and practices (Raphael et al., 2014).

Collaboration. Collaboration is another important component of effective professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Learning Forward, 2011). According to Learning Forward (2011), professional learning should occur within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment. Learning communities provide educators with opportunities to elevate their practice and share their knowledge with one another (Jensen et al., 2016; Learning Forward, 2011). Desimone and Garet (2015) defined collective participation as groups of educators engaging in activities together to build an interactive learning community. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) expressed that "collective work in trusting environments provides a basis for inquiry and reflection into teachers' own practices, allowing teachers to take risks, solve problems, and attend to dilemmas in their practice" (p. 10).

Of the 35 studies Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reviewed, 32 included collaboration to support professional learning. The researchers found that collaborative problem-solving can positively impact student achievement. Specifically, they showed that professional learning models associated with improved student outcomes provide opportunities for educators to work collaboratively and receive feedback from their colleagues (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Collaboration aligns with a sociocultural approach to professional learning. Sociocultural theory is based on the foundation that learning happens through interaction with others (Raphael et al., 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Professional learning models that provide opportunities for educators to collaborate with one another encourage participants to internalize new ideas and practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Raphael et al., 2014).

Sustained duration. Research shows that effective professional learning happens over a sustained period of time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Learning Forward, 2011; Raphael et al., 2014). From a sociocultural theoretical perspective, professional learning that happens over a sustained duration aids educators in internalizing and applying new strategies within their contexts (Raphael et al., 2014). Ongoing professional development allows educators to move through the quadrants of the Vygotsky Space to ultimately transform their practices (Raphael et al., 2014).

Desimone and Garet (2015) defined sustained duration as professional development that happens throughout the school year. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) stated that while research has "not yet identified a clear threshold for the duration of effective PD models, it does indicate that meaningful professional learning that translates to changes in practice cannot be accomplished in short, one-off workshops" (p. 95). While there is no consensus on the exact duration, it is clear that effective professional learning happens over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Raphael et al., 2014). Of the 35 studies Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reviewed, 31 described activities over a period of time including coaching sessions, workshops, or online learning. The authors shared that the most common model of sustained professional learning included an initial workshop with follow-up opportunities to reinforce learning such as classroom application, coaching, and collaborative sessions. Drawing from

sociocultural theory and the literature reviewed above on effective professional learning, the next section of this chapter will outline the need for training for counselors on financial and college advising.

The Need for Training on Financial Aid and College Advising.

A review of literature suggests that counselor training programs often do not include college and financial aid advising (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011, 2012). According to Bridgeland and Bruce (2011), counselors spend a considerable amount of time on college and financial aid advising, yet few graduate school and pre-service training programs include these topics or provide adequate related support for counselors. Data from the Second Annual National Survey of School Counselors, which was completed by 2,890 counselors from across the United States, showed that only 43% of counselors said they had sufficient knowledge and training on college affordability planning (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2012). Furthermore, only 42% of counselors said that they had training on using FAFSA completion data to monitor application completion and provide support to students (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2012).

Despite these findings, a few studies exist on high quality counselor training programs (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2011; Young, Gonzales, Owen, & Heltzer, 2015). Research suggests that counselor education programs need to be reimagined to effectively prepare school counselors for 21st-century urban schools (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2011). Additionally, Young et al. (2015) highlighted the key components of the action-research training model at one graduate school of education. They asserted that school counseling curriculum should prepare counselors to be action-researchers who effectively use data to connect theory to practice.

According to Young et al. (2015), training for counselors on how to analyze and use data to inform practice includes five key steps. First, counselors-in-training begin by mining data with support from their supervisor. Next, they review the data and determine an action-research question. Then, counselors-in-training determine specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound (SMART) goals to answer their action research question. Next, they outline appropriate intervention strategies to address their identified problem. From there, counselors-in-training analyze process, perception, and outcome data. The recommendations from Young et al.'s (2015) article, particularly the data mining process, are helpful in conceptualizing ways to support counselors in using data to increase their students' completion of the FAFSA.

To address counselors' limited training on college affordability, Bridgeland and Bruce (2012) highlighted that counselors should utilize external resources, such as universities, to support FAFSA completion efforts. Additionally, Bridgeland and Bruce (2012) outlined successful FAFSA completion strategies that can be introduced to high school counselors, including using individual student FAFSA completion reports to identify students who have not completed the FAFSA and provide early intervention. These strategies align with previously reviewed research (Erisman & Steele, 2018; Owen & Westlund, 2016) and will be a key component of this intervention.

A literature search for studies of professional development for practicing counselors focused specifically on the college enrollment process and financial aid advising yielded limited results. The previous studies discussed above included a training component as part of a FAFSA-related intervention. However, it is not possible to distinguish the effects of training versus the additional supports in those studies. The current study focuses on a professional development

intervention and could therefore contribute to literature on professional development for high school counselors around financial aid advising.

Description of Intervention

Based on structural elements and conceptual underpinnings from the interventions examined in this literature review above, I developed a professional development intervention for high school counselors in New Orleans that was designed to increase counselor effectiveness in helping high school seniors complete the FAFSA and overcome the hurdles of verification. The intended professional development involved six hours of training on using FAFSA completion data and other strategies to encourage FAFSA completion and nine additional hours of supportive coaching throughout the semester. To cultivate agency, I allowed counselors to choose between individualized coaching or participation in a collaborative professional learning community. Chapter 4 will provide more details about the intervention as well as a description of how the original plan was adapted in practice.

Chapter 4: Intervention Procedure and Program Evaluation Methodology

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 3, research demonstrates that counselors play a critical role in helping students navigate the financial aid process (Bettinger et al., 2013; Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2014; Owen & Westlund, 2016; Page et al., 2016). Building upon this research, the intervention in this study involved equipping New Orleans high school counselors to provide comprehensive FAFSA completion support to their students using a tiered approach. Treatment group high school counselors participated in one three-hour training session on the FAFSA, how to use individual FAFSA completion reports, and research-based strategies to increase FAFSA completion. Then counselors participated in a second three-hour training on how to support students who had been selected for verification. Following that, counselors engaged in monthly collaborative professional learning sessions focused on responding to individual FAFSA completion reports and implementing the strategies upon which they received training. On the other hand, control group counselors did not receive the professional development intervention, but were offered to receive the same professional development after the study concluded.

The expected long-term outcomes of this intervention were increased college enrollment, persistence, and ultimately degree completion for New Orleans public high school students. While these outcomes were not measurable within the timeframe of this dissertation, research demonstrates that targeted FAFSA support can lead to significant improvements in college enrollment, persistence, and completion (Bettinger, et al., 2013; Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2014; Page et al., 2016). The medium-term outcome and dependent variable of the study

was FAFSA completion by New Orleans high school students. This dissertation sought to address the following process and outcome evaluation questions.

Process Evaluation Research Questions

PEQ 1: To what extent did counselors receive the intended intervention?

a) To what extent did counselors participate in the intended hours of professional development?

b) To what extent did counselors demonstrate awareness of information delivered during the professional development?

PEQ2: How did counselors perceive the quality of intervention support they received?

PEQ 3: To what extent did New Orleans high school counselors implement the intervention strategies related to increasing FAFSA completion?

PEQ4: How did students and families react to counselors' efforts to encourage FAFSA completion at treatment schools?

Outcome Evaluation Research Questions

OEQ1: What was the extent of difference in school-level FAFSA completion rates between schools whose counselors participated in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (treatment group) and schools whose counselors did not participate in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (control group)?

OEQ2: What factors helped to explain the difference in these rates?

Logic Model and Research Design

Following Leviton and Lipsey (2007), this section summarizes the logic model associated with the intervention described in Chapter 3. It then outlines the process evaluation and outcome evaluation designs used in the study.

The Logic Model

The logic model for this FAFSA completion intervention (Appendix C) outlines inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Inputs included: support from Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) as expressed by access to counselors, students, and FAFSA completion data; high school counselors', students', and families' time; and funding for materials and equipment, such as the text messaging platform and computers. The activities or ingredients of treatment are discussed more fully in the description of the intervention below. The logic model details the mechanisms of treatment as well as the mediating variables, hypothesizing that the treatment described above would cause counselors to have increased capacity and a greater sense of responsibility to support students and families on completing the FAFSA. This in turn was expected to lead to more FAFSA-related information-sharing between counselors and students and families, which would lead to increased FAFSA completion. Finally, the logic model precisely defines the desired outcomes: increased FAFSA completion by New Orleans high school students.

Process Evaluation Design

The process evaluation involved a multiple case study design at each intervention site. It attended to the intervention's context, implementation, participant responsiveness, and quality of delivery (Baranowski & Stables, 2000; Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, & Hansen, 2003; Linnan & Steckler, 2002).

Outcome Evaluation Design

The outcome evaluation employed a mixed methods research design, which blended qualitative and quantitative analysis of data to provide a more holistic understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010). To address the research question about the impact of the intervention, the study employed a randomized controlled trial design (Shadish,

Cook, & Campbell, 2002; Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010) at the school level to determine whether there was a difference in FAFSA completion rates between students whose counselors participated in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (treatment group) and students whose counselors did not participate in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (control group).

Unlike Owen and Westlund's (2016) study, which was described in Chapter 3, the treatment and control groups in this study were not comprised of two different cohorts of graduating classes. Instead the treatment and control groups were comprised of twelfth graders during the same academic year, but from different groups of high schools that were similar at baseline in their FAFSA completion rates from the previous school year and other school characteristics such as academic performance and school size. To address the research question regarding the mechanisms explaining differences between the groups, the mixed methods study supplemented analyses of quantitative data on FAFSA completion rates with analysis of qualitative interview data from school counselors.

Methods

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was New Orleans, as described in Chapter 2. In contrast to the needs assessment, the intervention study took place a year after the implementation of the new Louisiana policy requiring completion of the FAFSA by all high school seniors. During the 2018-2019 school year, there were 22 public high schools in New Orleans, with approximately 50 high school counselors and 3,200 high school seniors (Louisiana Department of Education, 2019).

The primary participants in this study were New Orleans public high school counselors. To recruit participants for the study, I sent emails to all New Orleans public high school principals inviting them to participate. Eight high school principals responded, and all eight opted in to the study. Once high school principals opted in, I conducted outreach to counselors at each participating high school. Counselors at all eight high schools opted in to the FAFSA intervention (one counselor from each of seven schools, and two counselors from one treatment school). It is important to note that the participants in this intervention are not entirely the same counselors as those in the needs assessment. By chance, two of the control group counselors were also needs assessment participants.

Table 4.1

Participating High Schools' Baseline School Characteristics

High School Number	% Black	% White	% Minority	% Economically Disadvantaged	2017 Letter Grade	June 2018 FAFSA Completions	2018 12th Grade Enrollment
TS1	30%	38%	62%	36%	A	171	193
TS2	44%	30%	70%	72%	A	106	164
TS3	89%	2%	98%	88%	C	103	134
TS4	88%	1%	99%	91%	D	129	201
CS1	26%	57%	43%	24%	A	116	133
CS2	94%	1%	99%	85%	B	120	130
CS3	80%	8%	92%	71%	B	83	107
CS4	90%	0%	100%	85%	D	14	45

Table 4.1 outlines baseline school characteristics of these eight schools, including 2017 school letter grade, student demographics, and FAFSA completion rates. As the table indicates, students in the New Orleans study schools (except for the selective admissions schools) were primarily Black, while students in the Owen and Westlund (2016) study were primarily Hispanic. This study thus provides a test of the effectiveness of a FAFSA intervention with a demographically different student population.

Random Assignment

Randomization was conducted by my dissertation chair. The schools were divided into two blocks: those with selective admission policies and those with open admission policies. The two selective schools were separately designated as "heads" and "tails" for a coin flip to determine the treatment school (with the other school designated as control). The six non-selective schools were numbered (1-6). Slips with those numbers hidden were shuffled and presented to the randomizer, who randomly selected three slips to identify which schools were assigned to the treatment condition. The remaining schools were assigned to the control condition. Assignment to the treatment or control group comprised the independent variable in this study.

Process Evaluation Measures

The following section provides an overview of indicators for the process evaluation. Additionally, the Data Collection Matrix (Table 4.1) outlines the data needs and data collection plan for the process evaluation.

Counselor attendance at FAFSA training and professional learning sessions. Counselor attendance at the two initial three-hour FAFSA training sessions and the subsequent professional learning sessions was an indicator in this study. This indicator relates to program implementation and participant responsiveness as described by Baranowski and Stables (2000) and Linnan and Stecker (2002). This indicator was measured by attendance logs. School-level measures for attendance at training were calculated. Attendance at the FAFSA professional development sessions is noted in the logic model under activities.

Counselors' perception of the quality of training they received. This indicator was measured by Likert-style questions on the post-training survey and qualitative interviews at the

end of the intervention. Questions included: “This training was a good use of my time”; “This training was high quality”; “I learned something new about FAFSA completion strategies as a result of this training”; and “As a result of today's training, I have specific strategies to support my students and their families in completing the FAFSA.”

Counselors’ awareness of intervention components. Another indicator was high school counselors’ awareness of intervention components. This indicator relates to Dusenbury et al.’s (2003) assertion that participant responsiveness refers to the degree to which participants are aware of the elements of the intervention. Participant awareness was measured by post-training survey question about strategies they would use to support their students in completing the FAFSA.

Counselors’ implementation of strategies emphasized in PD intervention. Measures of counselor practices to provide FAFSA-support for their students were constructed from qualitative interview data. They focused on the following practices: hosting whole group FAFSA completion sessions, utilizing support from financial professionals from local universities; using text messages or automated calls to efficiently send messages to families with FAFSA related information; using student FAFSA completion data to determine which students had completed the FAFSA and who had not; and providing individualized FAFSA completion advising for students who had not completed the FAFSA; and supporting students who were selected for verification. A summary variable of how many components were mentioned was created for each counselor.

Student and family perceptions of counselors' FAFSA completion support. Likert-type survey items were intended to measure student and families' perceptions of the helpfulness of FAFSA completion support by school counselors.

Outcome Evaluation Measures

The following section provides an overview of proposed indicators for the outcome evaluation. Additionally, Table 4.2 outlines the data needs and data collection plan for the outcome evaluation.

FAFSA completion. The outcome and dependent variable of the study was FAFSA completion by New Orleans high school twelfth grade students. School-level FAFSA form completion rates were calculated using data from FAFSA completion reports, which the U.S. Department of Education releases by high school along with the Louisiana Department of Education's 12th Grade Student Enrollment Count for each high school as the denominator (Louisiana Department of Education, 2019).

Independent variable. The primary independent variable in this study was whether or not counselors had access to the intervention. Therefore, schools in the control group were coded as 0 and schools assigned to the intervention were coded as 1.

Other variables. Key contextual variables are outlined in the Data Collection Matrix (Table 4.2). These include high school context, student demographics, and schools' academic performance. All schools were expected to be affected equally by the new FAFSA completion Louisiana graduation policy and the newly simplified FAFSA form.

Instrumentation

a) Pre-intervention Likert-style survey for treatment and control group counselors.

b) Post-training survey for treatment group counselors.

c) Post-intervention interview protocol for control and treatment group counselors.

d) Process observation field notes.

e) Student/family surveys.

f) School level data on FAFSA completion rates and other school characteristics.

Procedure

This section outlines this study's procedure, including plans for the intervention, data collection, and data analysis.

Intervention

Drawing from the research discussed in Chapter 3, this intervention aimed to equip New Orleans high school counselors to support student completion of the FAFSA. Because the needs assessment found that time was a barrier for counselors, the intervention involved providing counselors with a structure and tools intended to increase their efficiency in supporting their students on the FAFSA. As such, the intervention involved two three-hour trainings for counselors from the treatment group followed by four collaborative professional learning sessions over the course of four months during the second semester of the 2018-2019 school year.

The first three-hour training focused on how to use a tiered approach to support students and families on the FAFSA application, including research-based strategies to increase contact with students and families related to FAFSA completion, such as text messaging, FAFSA completion events, individual FAFSA completion sessions, and utilizing the support of local financial aid experts (Bird et al., 2017; Erisman & Steele, 2018; Owen & Westlund, 2016). Additionally, the first training focused on using and responding to individual student FAFSA completion reports from the U.S. Department of Education.

The second three-hour training focused on FAFSA verification and how to support students in getting from FAFSA submission to FAFSA completion—a key distinction described in Chapter 2. If students submit the FAFSA, but do not complete it, they are not able to access federal or university-based aid.

These two initial FAFSA training sessions incorporated the principles of effective professional learning, which were outlined in the literature review including active learning and collaboration. Additionally, counselors were offered support on hosting FAFSA completion events, including tools such as PowerPoint presentations, "How To" guides, and parent handouts, as well as connections to local financial aid experts who could provide individualized support to families during these events.

To draw from literature on effective professional learning, in particular cultivating agency (Calvert, 2016), and to ensure ethical research using the framework of Participatory Action Research (Chapman, 2019), the intervention design involved giving counselors active choice in the direction of their professional learning following the two initial trainings. Moreover, involving educators in decision-making about their learning is a central tenet of agency-centered professional learning (Calvert, 2016). Additionally, Participatory Action Research provides a framework for ethical engagement and holds that researchers need to pay attention to power dynamics and ensure that participants have agency over the direction of studies in which they participate (Chapman, 2019). Therefore, I gave counselors the choice of whether they would like to receive individualized coaching or participate in collaborative professional learning sessions. Counselors unanimously chose to engage in collaborative professional learning. Following the initial training, treatment group counselors engaged in four two-hour collaborative professional learning sessions. These sessions drew from components of

effective professional learning including active learning, collaboration, agency, and sustained duration. During these sessions, treatment group counselors discussed FAFSA-related successes and challenges, shared resources and strategies with one another, and used FAFSA completion data to determine support for students. Chapter 5 provides a rich description of the process of the intervention's implementation. See Appendices G and H for the detailed training plan.

Data Collection for Process Evaluation

Counselors' attendance at FAFSA training sessions and participation in collaborative professional learning sessions. Counselors' attendance at the FAFSA trainings and collaborative professional learning sessions were measured by attendance records. This data was collected at each training and professional learning session and kept in a secure file.

Counselors' perception of training quality. Counselors' perception of training quality was measured by a brief survey with counselors at the end of the training session. This data was collected on a paper survey and then entered into an Excel file and transported to SSPS. Additionally, counselors were asked questions about their perceptions of the professional development sessions during the post-intervention interviews.

Counselors' awareness of intervention components. Counselors' awareness of intervention components was collected as part of interviews with all counselors after the intervention was complete.

FAFSA completion sessions. Counselors were asked to track the number of FAFSA completion sessions they hosted. Post-intervention interviews also included questions about FAFSA completion sessions.

Student and family perceptions of FAFSA completion sessions. To assess students' and families' perception of the FAFSA completion support they received from their counselors,

treatment group counselors were asked to have students and parents complete a mini-survey reporting their experience at a FAFSA completion session and adding comments about how school could provide additional support on college financial aid issues. Counselors were provided with envelopes to keep the surveys confidentially and asked to bring the envelopes back to the researcher.

Data Collection Description for Outcome Evaluation

FAFSA completion. School-level FAFSA completion numbers were downloaded from the U.S. Department of Education's FAFSA Completion Reports into an Excel file. To determine FAFSA completion rates, the number of 12th grade students was collected from the Louisiana Department of Education's 12th Grade Student Enrollment Count for each high school as the denominator (Louisiana Department of Education, 2019).

Counselors' caseloads, training experiences, and reported practices related to FAFSA completion. Counselors' caseload information was collected from both the treatment and control groups as part of the counselor survey at the beginning of the intervention and was confirmed during the post-intervention interview. The post-intervention interview collected information on training experiences and reported practices.

Data Analysis for Process Evaluation

This mixed-methods research study utilized quantitative and qualitative analyses using a convergent parallel research design (Creswell & Plano, 2011). Quantitative process measure data, including treatment group counselor attendance at the FAFSA trainings and professional learning sessions, counselors' awareness of intervention components, counselors' perception of the quality of support they received, and counselors' implementation of the intervention strategies related to FAFSA completion were compiled into a dataset and descriptive analyses were conducted.

Qualitative process data, including interview transcripts, observational field notes, and open-ended survey responses were studied using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis steps included transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, and searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Using both a priori and emergent coding techniques allowed me to uncover themes across the qualitative data. The Process Evaluation Summary Matrix can be viewed below as Table 4.3.

Data Analysis for Outcome Evaluation

Analyses to determine baseline equivalence between the treatment and control schools on FAFSA completion rates were conducted using an independent sample t-test. FAFSA completion data pulled from the U.S. Department of Education in June 2018, January 2019, and June 2019 were analyzed in Excel and SPSS to determine differences in FAFSA completion rates between treatment and control schools using descriptive and inferential analyses. Analyses of the impact of the treatment relied on comparing treatment and control schools on measures of growth in FAFSA completion rates using independent sample t-tests.[4]

Qualitative data, including interview transcripts, observational field notes, and open-ended survey responses, were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thematic analysis steps included transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, and searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Using both a priori and emergent coding techniques allowed me to uncover themes across the interview and observation data to better understand the impact of the intervention on the outcome variable, FAFSA completion. The Outcome Evaluation Summary Matrix can be viewed below as Table 4.3.

Summary Matrices

The summary matrices below present alignment between research questions and data

[4] This analysis on growth scores is the same as a paired-samples t-test.

collection. These matrices can be viewed as Table 4.2 and 4.3.

Table 4.2
Process Evaluation Summary Matrix

Research Question	Process Evaluation Indicator	Data Source	Measure	Frequency of Data Collection	Data Analysis
PEQ1	Treatment group counselor attendance at FAFSA training sessions	Attendance records	Hours attended (0-6)	At two three-hour training sessions for counselors at the beginning of the school year	Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses
PEQ1	Counselor participation in professional learning sessions	Attendance records	Number of two-hour professional learning sessions attended (0-4)	At each follow-up professional learning session during 2018-19 School Year	Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses
PEQ1	Counselors' awareness of intervention components	Interviews with counselors	Themes from interviews	Interviews were conducted after the intervention was complete	Coding of themes from interviews
PEQ2	Counselors' implementation of the intervention strategies related to increasing FAFSA completion	Interviews with counselors	Whole group FAFSA completion sessions held; Review of FAFSA completion data, individualized FAFSA verification and completion support, if needed.	Interviews were conducted after the intervention was complete	Descriptive statistical analyses
PEQ3	Counselors perception of the quality of intervention support they received	Counselor survey	Likert-style survey	Once after the training	Descriptive statistical analyses
PEQ4	Students reaction to counselors' efforts at encouraging FAFSA completion at treatment schools	Student survey	Likert-style survey	Once after 1:1 FAFSA completion meeting	Descriptive statistical analyses

Table 4.3
Outcome Evaluation Summary Matrix

Research Question	Outcome Evaluation Indicator	Role of the Indicator	Data Source/ Measure	Frequency of Data Collection	Data Analysis
OEQ1	FAFSA Completion	Outcome/ Dependent Variable	School-level FAFSA form completion rates were calculated using data from FAFSA completion reports, which the U.S. Department of Education releases by high school along with the Louisiana Department of Education's 12th Grade Student Enrollment Count for each high school as the denominator	Weekly Summative: Final FAFSA completion rates were used to determine the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable	Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses
OEQ2	Counselor's caseload/ counselor-to-student ratio	Moderating variable	Measured by counselor survey	Once—at the beginning of the intervention	Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses
OEQ2	Counselor implementation of best practices	Mediating variables	Counselor interviews	Once – at end of intervention	Qualitative data analysis methods
OEQ2	Counselor reception of training support around FAFSA best practices	Mediating variables	Counselor interviews	Once – at end of intervention	Qualitative data analysis methods

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

Rich Description of the Process of Intervention Implementation

During the second semester of the 2019 school year, treatment group counselors attended two three-hour trainings on the FAFSA and on FAFSA verification early in the semester and four monthly two-hour professional learning sessions over the rest of the semester. Counselors learned about how to implement a tiered approach to FAFSA completion advisement and about how to best support students who were selected for verification. The training and subsequent collaborative professional learning sessions were designed to incorporate elements of effective professional development including active learning, agency, collaboration, response to data, and sustained duration.

Active learning. Active learning is a principle of effective professional development, which creates opportunities for educators to engage in practice and dialogues and then receive feedback, rather than passively listening to a presentation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Learning Forward, 2011). To incorporate active learning design, the session included a game-style quiz to activate counselors' prior knowledge about the FAFSA. Through an active learning approach, the sessions provided multiple opportunities for personal reflection and discussion in pairs and with the whole group. Active learning gives practitioners have the opportunity to practice what they will later deliver and receive feedback. Therefore, in these trainings, counselors practiced leading meetings with students and families and reviewing individual FAFSA completion reports. Following their practice sessions, they received feedback from their colleagues and facilitator. Counselors had the opportunity to collaborate with one another by practicing together, sharing ideas and resources with one another, and seeking feedback from other treatment group members.

Agency. Following the two initial trainings, to encourage agency and collaboration, I posed a question to the group about how they would like to move forward. I asked if they would prefer to continue to meet as a whole group in a professional learning community or if they would like to have one-on-one individualized coaching sessions. The treatment group counselors collectively decided that they would like to participate in a professional learning community. Therefore, over the course of the second semester of the 2018-2019 school year we held four two-hour professional learning sessions for a total of 14 hours of professional development over four months which aligns with sustained duration—a key component of effective professional development. Having treatment group counselors play a role in deciding how they moved forward with the second part of the intervention was intended to encourage counselors' agency.

To help cultivate agency, one standing agenda item during the professional development sessions was collective problem-solving, where treatment group counselors shared problems they were facing and received tangible, actionable suggestions from their colleagues. The strategies highlighted during interviews, such as building trust with families, utilizing the FSA chat feature, and combining FAFSA completion meetings with other senior-year events, were all discussed during the professional learning community meetings. This shows that counselors internalized the FAFSA completion suggestions their peers offered during the professional learning sessions and demonstrated agency in implementing these suggestions.

Collaboration. At the four collaborative professional learning sessions, conducted monthly during the second semester, we discussed FAFSA completion strategies, challenges, and solutions and provided support on implementation. At the beginning of each session, we did a quick check-in to see how counselors were doing, what successes they had with regards to FAFSA completion, and what challenges we were facing. When counselors shared successes, I

facilitated dialogue to encourage other counselors to learn from their colleagues' successes. For example, I asked the group if they had tried something similar in the past and if it had been successful. I also asked counselors to specify the steps they took and what made the strategy a success.

Following our discussion of successful FAFSA completion strategies, I asked the group to select one or two challenges they heard from their colleagues to discuss. We then engaged in a collective problem-solving exercise, where other counselors asked clarifying and thought-provoking questions, and suggested potential solutions their colleagues could try. After the collective problem-solving discussion, I asked the counselor(s) who had presented a challenge to share with the group which of the solutions discussed most resonated with them and what specific actions they would commit to trying out with their students. This aimed to encourage counselors' agency and collaborative learning.

Response to data. After we discussed successes and solutions to FAFSA challenges, I asked counselors to take out their FAFSA data. We analyzed individual student FAFSA completion data to determine which seniors had completed the FAFSA and which had not. Counselors engaged in data-mining and SMART goal-setting process described in Young et al.'s (2015) study. Following a tiered approach (Erisman & Steele, 2018; Owen & Westlund, 2016), counselors used their data sets to determine which research-based FAFSA completion practice would be the right next step with each student. Moreover, this intervention aimed to support counselors in providing differentiated levels of support (Erisman & Steele, 2018). For example, counselors were encouraged to use research-based targeted strategies such as one-on-one FAFSA completion meetings to support students who had not yet completed the FAFSA (Erisman & Steele, 2018; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Owen & Westlund, 2016). Counselors then

committed to next steps in response to the FAFSA completion data.

Co-creation to promote collaboration and agency. At the final collaborative learning session, I asked treatment group counselors what they would like to share with other counselors in order to increase FAFSA completion rates, now that they had been through the intervention. Treatment group counselors mapped out a yearly plan including a training schedule, opportunities for collaborative professional learning, and detailed steps counselors could take. This plan drew heavily from the components of the intervention based on research. This shows that treatment group counselors internalized the elements of the intervention and moved along Vygotsky's continuum from appropriation, to transformation, to publication, to conventionalization of new ideas and practices (Raphael et al., 2014). Treatment group counselors offered to co-facilitate future FAFSA trainings for counselors with great enthusiasm. Following the study, during the 2019-2020 school year, two treatment group counselors helped lead FAFSA trainings for other New Orleans high school counselors. This co-creation of FAFSA training and resources for other counselors aimed to encourage treatment group counselors' collaboration with one another and their agency to utilize and expand upon what they had learned during the intervention.

On the other hand, control group counselors did not receive the training or participate in the professional learning sessions. However, control group counselors were offered to receive similar professional development the following school year after the study concluded. Furthermore, because of the decentralized nature of New Orleans' public school system, there are no district-wide professional development opportunities for high school counselors.

The following research questions focused the analyses within this study:

Process Evaluation Findings

PEQ 1: To what extent did counselors receive the intended intervention?

PEQ 2: How did counselors perceive the quality of intervention support they received?

PEQ 3: To what extent did New Orleans high school counselors implement the intervention strategies related to increasing FAFSA completion?

PEQ4: How did students react to counselors' efforts to encourage FAFSA completion at treatment schools?

Process Evaluation Research Question 1

The first indicator of the extent to which counselors received the intended intervention was their attendance at the professional development sessions (training sessions on FAFSA completion best practices, resources, and FAFSA verification, and the four professional learning sessions throughout the semester). Four out of five treatment group counselors (representing three treatment group schools) attended both trainings for all six hours. One treatment group counselor missed the first three-hour training but made up the training by having a one-on-one session covering the same content. All five treatment group counselors attended each of the four two-hour FAFSA professional learning sessions. Overall, the average number of hours of professional development experienced by the five counselors was 13.7 hours of the total of 14 hours (with four of the five counselors receiving all 14 hours). Treatment group counselors' attendance at the initial FAFSA trainings and professional learning sessions indicates that all counselors received the intended training on FAFSA completion strategies.

The second indicator of treatment group counselors receiving the intended intervention was their awareness of intervention components. An analysis of the interview transcripts shows that treatment group counselors were aware of the training and professional learning components

of the intervention. During interviews, all five treatment group counselors mentioned each of these components of the FAFSA intervention without specific prompting. All treatment group counselors highlighted the key effective strategies covered during the FAFSA training. Moreover, counselors described using a tiered approach, included hosting whole group FAFSA completion sessions, using a data system to track and respond to FAFSA completion, holding individual and small group FAFSA completion meetings with students who did not complete the FAFSA during the whole group sessions, and providing additional support for students who were selected for verification. This demonstrates that counselors not only were aware of the intervention components, but also implemented them, and found them to be effective strategies.

Process Evaluation Research Question 2

Next, I examined how treatment group counselors perceived the quality of intervention support they received. Following the initial FAFSA completion training, treatment group counselors responded to a series of Likert-style survey questions about the training. All five counselors (100%) strongly agreed with the following statements: "This training was a good use of my time," "This training was high quality," and "I learned something new about FAFSA completion strategies as a result of this training." In response to the prompt: "As a result of today's training, I have specific strategies to support my students and their families in completing the FAFSA," four out of five treatment group counselors strongly agreed and one agreed. Overall, these responses show that counselors perceived the training to be high quality, a good use of their time, and an opportunity to learn more about FAFSA completion strategies. One note is that treatment group counselors' responses could have been influenced by social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is when respondents provide answers that differ from their actual beliefs because of self-deception or other-deception, so that they can feel better about

themselves or appear better to others. (Larson, 2019; Nederhof, 1985). Given that I was both the researcher and professional development facilitator, it is possible that treatment group counselors responded more favorably to the questions on the survey.

When asked about whether there was anything not covered in the training that they wished had been, all counselors said there was not anything that should be added. One counselor stated: "I can't think of anything. You have a handbook on students with non-traditional needs. You cover it all." Another interviewee responded: "Nothing that I can think of. It would be great for people to get together more going forward. We should do something like this next year and open it up to more counselors." This counselor's response relates to a discussion from the final professional learning community session. All counselors said they would like to offer professional development opportunities like this to other counselors in the city. Treatment group counselors offered to help plan and facilitate those sessions for the following school year.

Process Evaluation Research Question 3

Analysis of interview data shows that treatment group high school counselors followed the research-based tiered approach, which we covered during the training. Interview data was coded into variables measuring counselors' implementation of the following best practices: hosting whole group FAFSA completion sessions, utilizing support from financial professionals from local universities; using text messages or automated calls to efficiently send messages to families with FAFSA related information; using student FAFSA completion data to determine which students had completed the FAFSA and who had not; providing individualized FAFSA completion advising for students who had not completed the FAFSA; and supporting students who were selected for verification. A summary variable of how many components were

mentioned was created for each counselor. One hundred percent of treatment group counselors reported implementing all five of the components of the tiered approach.

Tiered approach. During interviews, counselors described using a tiered approach to their FAFSA completion support. Drawing from the research described in the literature review, this approach was a focus of the first training. Counselors described holding large group FAFSA completion sessions at the opening of FAFSA season, which they invited all seniors and their parents to attend. They aimed to support as many students and families as possible in completing the FAFSA during those sessions. Interviewees shared that they invited local university financial aid advisors and staff from LELA and LOFSA to those sessions so that there were additional knowledgeable financial aid advisors available to support students and families on FAFSA applications. After the whole group sessions, counselors described using student FAFSA completion data to identify which students had not yet completed the FAFSA. Then they described holding targeted small group or individual meetings with students who had not yet completed the FAFSA. A tiered approach was one of the central components covered throughout the training sessions.

FAFSA completion sessions. Three of the four treatment group schools held two group FAFSA completion sessions, to which every senior and their family were invited. One of the four treatment group schools held four group FAFSA completion sessions. During interviews, treatment group counselors described covering the following items during their FAFSA completion workshops. They provided an overview of what the FAFSA is and that it helps students get money for college. Counselors shared that FAFSA completion is now a Louisiana graduation requirement. They showed students and families how to create FSA IDs and gave families helpful hints about remembering their FSA IDs. They walked through a demonstration

FAFSA to provide an example for students and families. Next, they had students and their families get on computers and work on the FAFSA form. Counselors also said they invited financial aid officers from local universities to walk around and help families complete the FAFSA application.

Three counselors described breaking the whole group FAFSA completion sessions up into two sequential whole group meetings. First, they had an initial meeting at the beginning of the school year, where they provided an overview of the FAFSA and described what forms and information would be needed. Then they had students and families create FSA IDs. They followed this initial meeting with a separate FAFSA completion work session, where families brought their necessary tax information and forms and completed the FAFSA onsite with the support of their counselor or a volunteer financial aid officer.

Text messages. Because research shows that text messages have been effective mode of communication to efficiently share information with families about FAFSA completion (Bird et al., 2017), I asked counselors about their use of text messaging as an information-sharing strategy during interviews. Three out of five treatment group counselors (representing three different schools) stated that they used mass text messaging to send out information about their large group FAFSA completion events at least two times, with one treatment group counselor reporting that he texted students and families about the FAFSA and other college access milestones weekly. The other two treatment group counselors stated that they did not use text messages, but they did use automated calls and letters home to inform all senior families about FAFSA completion events. All treatment group counselors reported that they used some form of mass communication, such as text messaging and automated calls, to send information about the FAFSA and FAFSA completion support to all families on their caseloads.

Use of data. In Louisiana, high school counselors are supposed to be able to access student-level FAFSA completion reports with weekly updates on which students have submitted and completed the FAFSA, and which students have not. In theory, these reports could be very useful to counselors. If counselors can see which students have completed the FAFSA, they can help the students who have not. They can meet with those students to provide support on completing the FAFSA and help them overcome any barriers that may be in the way. According to participants in the study, counselors had challenges receiving the reports and when they did receive them, they were not always accurate. In order to assess counselors' use of individual student FAFSA completion data to inform their further support for students, I asked "How often did you review individual FAFSA completion reports? How did you use these?" during post-intervention interviews with treatment and control group counselors.

One treatment group counselor stated, "We didn't receive the individual reports from LOFSA, so we created our own spreadsheet with all college access milestones; we've been tracking all of this and using the student aid reports. We're entering not just submission but also completion. I looked at this spreadsheet at least six times a week. I used this for my meetings with students." Similarly, another treatment group counselor reported that she looked at the reports twice but "they were not super helpful or accurate" so she built a spreadsheet herself, which tracked submission, completion, expected family contribution (EFC), and whether students were selected for verification.

On the other hand, one treatment group counselor found the student-level FAFSA completion reports to be very helpful. She did not know the reports existed prior to participating in the professional learning intervention. About the reports, she stated: "I used them daily—they were my 'go to' to confirm whether students had completed the FAFSA. If students were 19 or

20, they weren't showing up, but at least I could see most of the students and it helped me narrow down who I should follow up with." This counselor used the reports to verify FAFSA completion and then follow up with students who were not listed in the reports to offer further support. Overall, all treatment group counselors reported using data systems to track which students had completed the FAFSA and which had not. This informed their tailored support for students on FAFSA completion.

Process Evaluation Research Question 4

The IRB protocol specified that parent and student surveys be conducted simultaneously after FAFSA completion events as a procedure within which parental consent could be obtained for student participation in data collection. This did not occur at any of the treatment schools. As a result, data are unfortunately not available for analysis to address this research question.

Outcome Evaluation Findings

The following outcome evaluation research questions focused the analyses within this study:

OEQ 1: What was the extent of difference in FAFSA completion between students whose counselors participated in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (treatment group) and students whose counselors did not participate in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (control group)?

OEQ 2: What factors helped to explain the difference in these rates?

Outcome Evaluation Research Question 1

Because analyses of an intervention's impact are based on the assumption of baseline equivalence between treatment and control groups, it was necessary to conduct analyses to determine how well random assignment worked for such a small group of schools. Using the

Department of Education's FAFSA completion data as of June 2018, I compared the average of the treatment and control groups' FAFSA completion rates (73.5% for treatment, 72% for control group). The standardized mean difference between groups, using Glass's delta (d) (Glass, 1976),[5] was .05, which meets[6] What Works Clearinghouse standards for baseline equivalence (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Because the intervention did not occur until second semester in 2018-19 (and notable changes can occur in schools as a new school year begins), it was also important to conduct a test of baseline equivalence based on data just prior to the beginning of the intervention. FAFSA completion rate data were also available from January 2019. Using the Department of Education's FAFSA completion data as of January 2019, we compared the average of the treatment and control groups' FAFSA completion rates (58.4% for treatment, 53% for control group). The standardized mean difference between groups, using Glass's delta (d) was .198.[7] Because analyses examined growth in FAFSA completion from this point, the slightly higher starting point for the treatment group compared to the control group is less a matter of concern than if the impact analysis focused on the actual end-of-year completion rate.

Figure 5.1 presents the FAFSA completion differences in each treatment and control school between June 2018 and June 2019 and summarizes the extent of difference in average FAFSA completion rates between schools whose counselors participated in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (treatment group) and schools whose counselors did not

[5] See Glass, 1976. This effect size is calculated by dividing the difference between treatment and control group means by the standard deviation of the control group.
[6] It is technically just at the point where statistical adjustments are needed in impact analyses to satisfy baseline equivalence requirements, but are beyond the scope of this dissertation research design.
[7] This delta would require statistical adjustments in impact analyses to satisfy baseline equivalence requirements, but are beyond the scope of this dissertation research design.

participate in the FAFSA completion outreach intervention (control group) at both baseline (June 2018) and after the intervention (June 2019). As presented in Figure 5.1, the control group's average FAFSA completion rate for June 2018 was 71.9%, compared to June 2019, which was 69.4% (a decline of 2.5 percentage points). On the other hand, the treatment group's average FAFSA completion rate before participating in the intervention was 73.4% in June of 2018. After participating in the intervention, the average FAFSA completion rate across treatment group schools was 79.6% in June of 2019. There was a 6.2 percentage point increase across treatment group schools after completing the intervention.

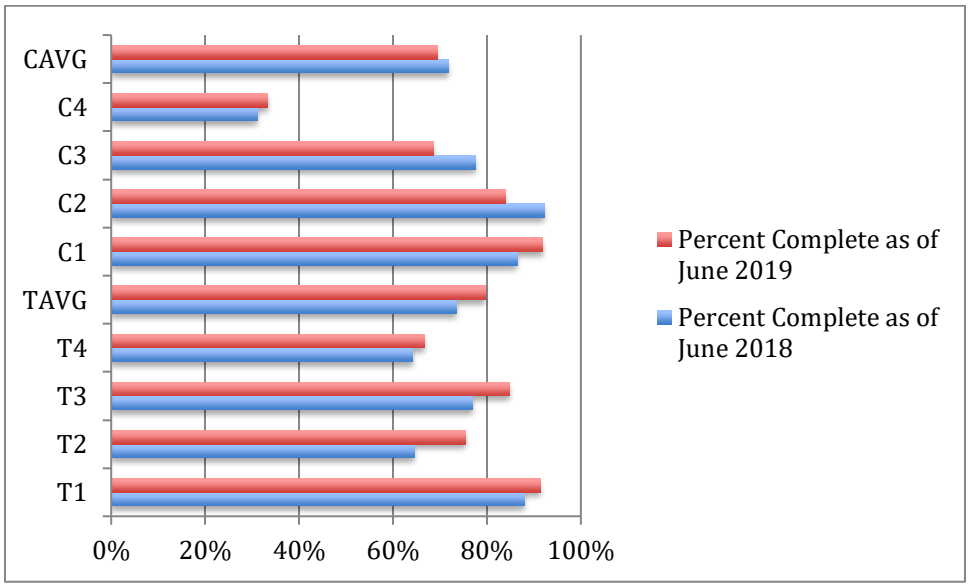

Figure 5.1. Difference in FAFSA completion rates June 2018 to June 2019. T refers to treatment group schools and C refers to control group schools.

Similarly, Figure 5.2 presents the FAFSA completion differences in each treatment and control school and summarizes the extent of difference in average FAFSA completion rates between schools whose counselors participated in the FAFSA completion intervention and schools whose counselors did not participate in the FAFSA completion intervention in January 2019 and in June 2019. As presented in Figure 5.2, the control group's average FAFSA

completion rate in January 2019 was 53.0%, compared to June 2019, which was 69.4%. On the other hand, the treatment group's average FAFSA completion rate just before the intervention was 58.4% in January 2019. After participating in the intervention, the average FAFSA completion rate across treatment group schools was 79.6% in June of 2019. There was a 21.2% increase across treatment schools over the course of the intervention, compared with a 16.4% increase across control schools. Because a considerable portion of high school seniors, in particular those selected for verification, complete the FAFSA during their spring semester of senior year, an increase in both treatment and control schools was expected over the duration of the intervention. However, the treatment group's average was much higher than that of the control group.

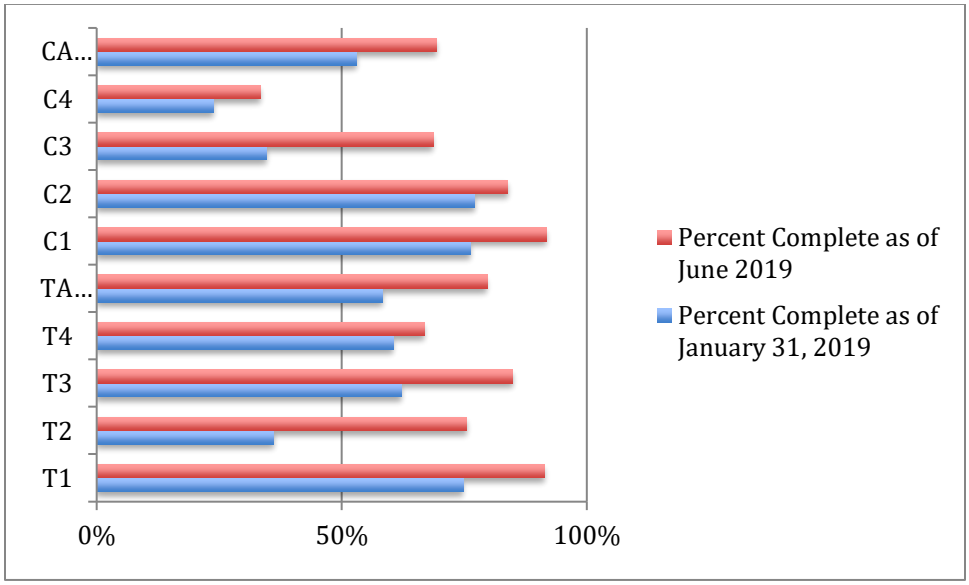

Figure 5.2. Difference in FAFSA completion rates January 2019 to June 2019. T refers to treatment group schools and C refers to control group schools.

Table 5.1 shows the difference in FAFSA completion gains from June 2018 to June 2019 between treatment and control schools. I conducted a one-way ANOVA and then calculated a

Glass's Delta effect size of 1.18,[8] demonstrating a relatively large effect. Even though it is difficult to detect a significant effect with small sample sizes, this effect was significant at $p < .10$ ($p = .082$).

Table 5.1

Gains from June 2018 to June 2019

	N	Mean Growth	Std. Deviation
Control	4	-.02	07
Treatment	4	.06	.04

Table 5.2 shows the difference in FAFSA completion from January 2019 to June 2019 between treatment and control schools. I conducted a one-way ANOVA and then calculated a Glass's delta effect size of .3925,[9] demonstrating a more moderate effect. The small size of the sample probably explains why this was not a statistically significant difference ($p=.623$).

Table 5.2

Gains from January 2019 to June 2019

	N	Mean Growth	Std. Deviation
Control	4	.16	.12
Treatment	4	.21	.13

Outcome Evaluation Research Question 2

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data indicated that several factors helped to explain the differences in FAFSA completion rates between treatment and control schools.

[8] Glass's delta= - (.0621--.0244)/.07313.
[9] Glass's delta = (.2125-.1646)/.1220.

Trends emerged in terms of support counselors received through the professional development intervention and support counselors provided to students.

Counselors' caseloads. Because research shows that counselors' caseloads can impact their students' outcomes (Shi & Brown, 2020), I analyzed treatment and control group counselors' caseload data. Analyses indicated that control group counselors had smaller caseloads on average than treatment group counselors, yet treatment group counselors had higher FAFSA completion rates. The average student-to-counselor ratio was 127:1 for the treatment group and 73:1 for the control group. These findings differ from extant research. However, this is likely due to the small sample size in this study. Additionally, all counselors in the study had relatively smaller caseloads than the national average. For example, the American School Counselor Association recommends that school counselors should have a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 or less (Shi & Brown, 2020). Whereas, in this study, the highest student-to-counselor ratio was 154:1. In this study, counselors' caseloads did not appear to explain differences in FAFSA completion rates between treatment and control schools.

Support counselors received. Analysis of interview data indicated that all counselors received some form of support. Counselors reported receiving support from local universities' financial aid offices, the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA), Louisiana Education Loan Authority (LELA), Southern Association for College Admission Counseling (SACAC), and the Cowen Institute. However, there was no district-supported professional development for New Orleans high school counselors. Treatment group counselors found the support they received from the intervention to be particularly helpful to them. All treatment group counselors stated that participation in the professional learning intervention was the most

helpful support they received, highlighting the value of participating in a collaborative learning community and the support they received on FAFSA verification.

Collaborative learning community. One key difference between treatment and control group counselors was the access treatment group counselors had to a collaborative learning community with other counselors. During interviews, all treatment group counselors emphasized the value they found in participating in the learning community with other counselors. For example, when asked about support received for working with 12th graders on college going issues, one treatment group counselor responded: "This (professional development intervention). Other than here, this group, nobody. There's no district. We don't have any district-wide all counselor meetings." This counselor emphasized the value of participating in a community of other practitioners especially given that New Orleans' public education system does not provide centralized support for high school counselors. Another treatment group counselor stated: "It was so good to be part of a group of people who are doing the same job as me and have done this before. They know what works and doesn't—now I know what to implement next year." A third treatment group counselor responded: "The sessions that we had with this group; the thought-sharing and problem-solving with each other. I learned about the FSA chat[10]—I had no idea that chat existed. Now I'm able to share that as an option with my students when they have a tough question, rather than having to wait a long time on the line for a someone to answer." Another treatment group counselor stated: "This group provided the opportunity to learn and collaborate with other counselors. That collaboration has been really helpful in problem solving."

In response to the question about the most useful components of the training and support, one treatment group counselor emphasized: "Our time together collective-problem solving,

[10] (https://studentaidhelp.ed.gov/app/chat/chat_launch/chat_data).

hearing from other's perspectives. It put me in a state of gratefulness. People are willing to help. I just need to ask." Another treatment counselor stated: "Collaborative planning with other counselors—some of the best stuff is when you're working with other colleagues who are doing similar things and you come together to share what works." In response to the question: "What advice would you give to counselors at other schools about how we can increase the number of students and families completing the FAFSA?" one treatment group counselor responded: "Get involved with the collaborative learning community, seek out professional development, it helps you feel more efficient and effective."

On the other hand, control group counselors described not having the opportunity to collaborate with other counselors. Additionally, they expressed the desire to work more closely with other practitioners. For example, one control group counselor stated: "I was the only counselor for seniors at my school and we don't have district-wide professional development. Aside from the support we get from LOFSA, and conferences I've gone to, I feel like I'm figuring this out on my own." Another control group counselor said, "I didn't really get support so I reached out to LELA (Louisiana Education Loan Authority) and to a counselor at another school for help." Overall, treatment group counselors reported that the collaborative community, which was part of the intervention, supported them in learning new FAFSA completion strategies and with solving challenges they faced in supporting their students. This was a notable difference from control group counselors' experiences.

FAFSA verification support. Another important difference between treatment and control group counselors' responses was the emphasis treatment group counselors placed on supporting students in overcoming FAFSA verification hurdles. As research shows, verification is often a barrier to FAFSA completion. During interviews, all five treatment group counselors

reported that the training on FAFSA verification was very helpful. For example, one treatment group counselor stated: “The verification training session helped me a great deal. Learning more about the verification process was transformational. I knew a lot about the FAFSA already, but that session really increased my knowledge and ability to support my students who submitted but hadn’t completed the FAFSA because they were selected for verification.”

Another counselor echoed the importance of “learning the difference between submitting the FAFSA and completing it. If a student is selected for verification, they might not complete the form and then they won’t access financial aid. Now I know how to support them.” An additional treatment group counselor expressed that the training on verification was “really helpful! Verification is a big struggle and I learned more about the codes on the Student Aid Reports, how to respond to them, and how to support my students when they are selected for verification.” Overall, treatment group counselors found the training helpful in equipping them with the tools to support students who are selected for verification in completing the FAFSA. By contrast, only one of the comparison group counselors emphasized the work they did to support students through the verification process to ensure FAFSA completion.

Preventing verification melt. I analyzed FAFSA completion data to understand what percentage of students who submitted the FAFSA also completed it. Then I examined the differences between the treatment and control groups and non-participating high schools. Of the treatment group’s students who had submitted the FAFSA by June 2019, 95.4% completed it. For the control group, 90.4% of students who had submitted the FAFSA by June 2019 completed it. This is compared with 85.9% of students whose high schools were not in the study. This was also higher than the national average, which is around 75% for similar populations of students (DeBaun, 2018). Without baseline verification (June 2018) data, it is not possible to attribute this

difference to the intervention. But future studies may be able to detect an effect of a similar intervention on preventing verification melt.

FAFSA completion session content. One difference noted between treatment and control group counselors was their reports of what they covered with parents and students in the FAFSA completion sessions. All treatment group counselors provided detailed and thorough overview of the topics they covered, including: having students create FSA IDs, providing a rationale for why FAFSA completion matters, walking through a sample FAFSA, sharing what forms are needed, and then giving families the chance to complete the FAFSA with financial aid officers from local universities in the room to provide individualized support. On the other hand, control group counselors' description of what they covered during FAFSA completion sessions were less thorough or specific.

Mobilizing parent engagement. Analysis of interview data indicated that while treatment and control group counselors both viewed low parent engagement as a barrier to students FAFSA completion, treatment group counselors were more proactive in reaching out to engage parents. Counselors from both groups reported challenges with parents who did not respond to their communications, attend FAFSA completion events or meetings, or have access to their tax documents or FSA IDs. One counselor stated: "The biggest challenges we faced were with parents. Parents not responding. Parents not having access to tax documents. Parents having lost FSA IDs." This trend was echoed throughout interviews with treatment and control group counselors. All interviewees reported that students and families would often forget or misplace their FSA ID and passwords. One key difference between treatment and control group counselors was that treatment group counselors shared strategies they used to overcome this barrier and actively engage parents.

For example, treatment group counselors expressed that they focused on building trusting relationships with parents. One counselor said: "I've been really intentional about developing earlier relationships with families so that when it comes to FAFSA time, it feels less transactional. I've worked hard to build stronger and more trusting relationships with my students' parents." Another treatment group counselor expressed: "Parents are going to be asked to put confidential and sensitive information on the FAFSA form. A lot of times, parents don't trust the government or schools so it's important to build relationships with them early on…We've been building trust since 9th grade so it's easier for me to work with parents on the FAFSA than it might be at another school." Overall, counselors reported trust-building with families as an important strategy that aided them in increasing FAFSA completion.

To address the challenge of parents and students often losing their FSA IDs, treatment group counselors stated that the FSA chat feature was a useful resource for students and families to retrieve FSA IDs and passwords. During one of the professional learning community sessions, one treatment group counselor shared the FSA ID chat as a resource, and this came up in several treatment group counselor's responses during interviews.

Additionally, treatment group counselors reported engaging parents through informing them about the Louisiana FAFSA graduation requirement to convey the importance of FAFSA completion. One counselor stated: "In my communications with students and families, I let them know it was mandatory. I showed them that requirement." Another counselor said: "When I talked to parents, I'd ask if they'd heard about the FAFSA. I'd tell them it's a graduation requirement and that their child would get access to free grants that they wouldn't have to pay back." Counselors stated that sharing the graduation requirement helped to create a rationale for parents about why it was important to complete the FAFSA. While all interviewees expressed

that they faced challenges with engaging and supporting parents with FAFSA completion, all treatment group counselors shared effective strategies they used to overcome this barrier, demonstrating agency, which was a focus of the intervention.

Other creative strategies. Analysis of interview transcripts showed that another key difference between treatment and control group counselors was that treatment group counselors came up with creative strategies to encourage FAFSA completion. Treatment group counselors shared that they combined FAFSA completion sessions with fun or mandatory events or senior-year milestones. One counselor said he held an FSA ID creation breakfast just before students took their senior pictures and got their senior class shirts. This event was well-attended and most students on his caseload created their FSA IDs at once, early in the school year. Another counselor held a follow-up FAFSA completion session during cap and gown pick up. A third interviewee stated that their school did not give out graduation tickets until the student had either showed proof of completing the FAFSA or had submitted a waiver. Overall, treatment group counselors used creativity to combine FAFSA completion events with other important and well-attended senior year events.

Treatment group counselors also noted publicly tracking and celebrating FAFSA completion success as a creative strategy. For example, one counselor shared that she had a FAFSA completion thermometer on a bulletin board that she updated regularly to show what percentage of seniors had completed the FAFSA. Other treatment counselors shared that they gave out pins, t-shirts, or pizza to all FAFSA completers. Overall, treatment group counselors highlighted several creative strategies they identified and implemented to support students in completing the FAFSA, while control group counselors did not mention such creative strategies during interviews.

Timing of FAFSA support. Treatment group counselors differed from control group counselors in the degree to which they stressed the importance of starting FAFSA completion support early. This may reflect a difference between treatment and control schools that was not due to the intervention, which did not begin until February. One treatment group counselor said: "Start early! Even though FAFSA doesn't open until October, students and families can create their FSA IDs earlier. We did a lesson for juniors about creating FSA IDs." Another treatment group counselor responded: "Use the resources already in place, leverage your colleagues to help, and leverage seniors to help support their classmates. Start early and let families know what information they'll need at the beginning of the year. Build trust with students and families and celebrate successes." Other treatment group counselors echoed this same trend during interviews. On the other hand, control group counselors did not stress the importance of starting early.

Summary

A few key factors help explain the difference in FAFSA completion rate growth. Analysis of interview data indicates that treatment group counselors found the collaborative professional learning community and the training on FAFSA verification to be critical to their success. Additionally, treatment group counselors appeared to implement the research-based tiered approach to FAFSA completion support, which likely contributed to their students' higher FAFSA completion rates. Furthermore, treatment group counselors appeared to have demonstrated higher levels of agency than their control group counterparts in their solutions to challenges, such as parent engagement.

Discussion

There were noteworthy changes within the New Orleans educational context during the three-year course of this dissertation. First, a statewide policy was implemented making

Louisiana the first state in the country to require students to submit the FAFSA or a waiver in order to graduate from high school. This caused a dramatic increase in FAFSA completion across the state from 2017 to 2019 (Louisiana FAFSA Completion Report, 2017, 2019). Second, New Orleans became a 100% charter school district. The New Orleans ecosystem is highly decentralized and there is no centralized professional development or support for New Orleans high school counselors. Both of these changes within the landscape were part of the backdrop in which the intervention was implemented and likely impacted the context for treatment, control, and non-participating schools. The policy pressure for FAFSA completion theoretically limited the potential impact of the intervention, while the lack of other professional development for counselors may have widened the contrast between treatment and control groups in ways that would not be the case in other districts.

This study found that treatment schools had higher FAFSA completion rate growth and experienced lower verification melt than comparison schools. As of June 2019, the average FAFSA completion rate for treatment group schools was 79.6%, compared with 69.4% for the control group. There was an 8.0 percentage point difference in the FAFSA completion rate growth between treatment group schools and control group schools from June 2018 to June 2019 and a 5.0 percentage point difference in growth between the groups from January 2019 to June 2019. Similarly, treatment group counselors were more likely to support students in preventing verification melt than their control and non-participating counterparts. For example, as noted previously, of the treatment group's students who had submitted the FAFSA by June 2019, 95.4% completed it, compared with 90.4% of students from the control group. The results of the study provide evidence that the intervention is promising and worthy of more extensive research. In the following sections I discuss limitations of the study, summarize its relationship to the

theoretical framework and literature reviewed earlier, and make recommendations about the future utility of this work for school systems and for high school counselor practice.

Limitations

Although the study involved a randomized control trial design and included aggregate outcomes based on results from nearly 1,200 twelfth grade students, one limitation in this study is the small sample size of high schools (four in the treatment group and four in the control group, for a total of eight high schools and nine counselors participating in the study). This lowered the power of the study to detect significant effects. The small sample size poses potential threats to statistical conclusion validity and generalizability (Shadish et al., 2002). Additionally, it is possible that the small sample size impacted the non-significance in differences in FAFSA completion gains between January 2019 and June 2019. Furthermore, even though the study found positive results overall, additional research with a larger group of schools is needed to provide more compelling evidence.

The significant difference in baseline FAFSA completion rates of participating high schools and non-participating high schools indicates some limitations in the generalizability of study findings even within its own geographic context. It is possible that characteristics of non-participating high schools were related to their non-participation and could also be linked to their ability to benefit from an intervention like the one conducted for this study.

Another limitation is that I was both the researcher and the professional development facilitator. I also have pre-existing relationships with several of the counselors in the treatment and control groups. Additionally, I hold an educational leadership position within New Orleans. Because of these factors, treatment group counselors' responses to survey and interview questions could have been influenced by social desirability bias. Social desirability refers to

when respondents alter their answers because of self-deception or the desire to appear favorably to others (Larson, 2019; Nederhof, 1985).

To address this potential limitation, I took steps to engage as an ethical participant researcher. Participatory Action Research provides a framework for ethical engagement (Chapman, 2019). First, researchers need to have a deep and immersive understanding of the context they are studying. Second, researchers need to pay attention to power dynamics and ensure that participants have agency over the direction of the study. As noted previously, a focus on cultivating agency was central to the intervention design. Third, research must be conducted with, rather than on participants, which was another key element of this intervention's collaborative professional learning approach. Fourth, research needs to center on creating social and individual change that is meaningful to participants, which was a focus of this study.

Relationship to Theoretical Frameworks

This dissertation employed two theoretical frameworks: social capital theory and sociocultural theory. Social capital theory was used to examine literature related to counselors' contact and information-sharing with their students about the FAFSA. Sociocultural theory was used to shape the professional learning sequence for high school counselors.

Social capital theory. Social capital is defined as the resources and information that flow through relationship ties (Bourdieu,1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). In this dissertation, I used social capital theory to explore New Orleans high school counselors' contact and information-sharing with their students about the FAFSA. Counselors in the study received training and support on how to effectively share information with their students using a tiered approach. First, counselors held whole group FAFSA completion sessions, with financial aid experts, to which all high school seniors and their families were invited. Attendees had access to information about

the FAFSA and resources for completing it. If students and their families did not attend the session, did not complete the FAFSA during the session, or faced another roadblock, counselors followed up to provide students with additional support. Using the tiered approach, counselors reviewed FAFSA completion data to determine which students needed extra help. Analysis of interview and observational data show that counselors actively used strategies to share information and resources with their students, acting as purveyors of social capital.

Sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory was the second framework utilized in this dissertation. According to sociocultural theory, knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Raphael, Vasquez, Fortune, Gavelek, & Au, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theory was used as a framework to shape the professional development provided to New Orleans high school counselors as part of the intervention. In particular, the concept of the Vygotsky space (Raphael et al., 2014) was used to create the professional learning sequence. Analysis of survey and interview data shows that treatment group counselors moved through the Vygotsky space from appropriation, to transformation, to publication, to conventionalization of FAFSA completion strategies. For example, in the initial trainings, counselors learned new information related to FAFSA completion and FAFSA verification support strategies. Then counselors applied what they learned at their high schools with their students, by using a tiered approach to provide FAFSA completion support. Additionally, they expanded upon the training they received and generated new ideas and strategies. Furthermore, during interviews counselors reported learning the most through social interaction with their colleagues, a key feature of sociocultural theory.

Relationship to Literature

Counselors' sharing of information. A review of literature showed that high school counselors' contact and information-sharing with their students can help influence FAFSA completion and college enrollment (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). While the sample size in this dissertation was small, this study affirmed these findings from extant literature. Analyses of interview, survey, and FAFSA completion data indicate that New Orleans high school counselors in the study were able to influence their students' FAFSA completion through using a tiered approach to information-sharing about the FAFSA.

Comprehensive FAFSA support using a tiered approach. Research shows that when high school counselors provide comprehensive FAFSA completion support using a tiered approach, students complete the FAFSA at higher rates (Erisman & Steele, 2018; Owen & Westlund, 2016). This intervention drew from the strategies outlined in Erisman and Steele's (2018) and Owen and Westlund's (2016) studies, including: hosting FAFSA completion events, raising awareness through text messaging and other communications efforts, leveraging community support such as local university financial aid officers, using individual FAFSA completion reports to provide tiered interventions, and providing individualized FAFSA completion and verification support (Erisman & Steele, 2018; Owen & Westlund, 2016). Analysis of interview data indicates that all treatment group counselors implemented the tiered approach to comprehensive FAFSA completion support upon which they received training during the intervention. Furthermore, students of treatment group counselors completed the FAFSA at higher rates than their control group and non-participating counterparts.

Verification support. Research shows that selection for verification is one of the biggest challenges to FAFSA completion (Babineau, 2018; DeBaun, 2018; Mulhere, 2017), but little research has been conducted about interventions that emphasize strategies for identifying and responding to this verification stage in the FAFSA completion chain. To address this challenge, a key component of the intervention was training counselors on the difference between FAFSA submission and completion, and how to support students who were selected for verification.

Analysis of interview data shows that treatment group counselors found training on FAFSA verification support to be one of the most helpful components of the intervention. Drawing from research, this intervention included a focus on FAFSA verification support. Analysis of FAFSA completion data shows that 95.4% of treatment group students completed the FAFSA after submitting it, versus 90.4% of control group students, indicating that the support treatment group counselors provided helped their students overcome "verification melt" at higher rates than their control group peers.

Professional learning literature. The intervention design drew from literature on elements of high-quality professional learning. Key features included: agency (Calvert, 2016; Raphael et al., 2014); active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015); collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015); and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Raphael et al., 2014). Analysis of observation and interview data indicated that these features were present during the trainings and collaborative professional learning sessions with treatment group counselors. In particular, counselors expressed that the collaboration with their colleagues was valuable.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

The first implication for practice from this study relates to the policy context in which it was conducted. Following implementation of the statewide graduation requirement, Louisiana became the state with the highest FAFSA completion rate in the country (Haughey, 2018). Additional states are considering following Louisiana's lead. Recently, Illinois and Texas implemented FAFSA graduation requirements and California, the District of Columbia, Indiana and Michigan are considering similar policies. Other states and districts could consider such a policy change as a strategy to ensure that students maximize their college and financial aid opportunities.

Second, it is critical that policy changes—such as the FAFSA completion requirement—are coupled with support for high school counselors, students, and families. This dissertation outlined multiple ways to support high school counselors, including trainings on FAFSA completion and verification support strategies as well as creation of professional learning communities for high school counselors. This support for counselors should draw from literature on effective professional development, fostering active learning, counselor agency, and collaboration.

Third, school systems should consider following the tiered approach to comprehensive FAFSA completion support described in this dissertation. Based on the work of Erisman and Steele (2018) and Owen and Westlund (2016), such tiered support should include hosting FAFSA completion events, raising awareness through text messaging and other communications efforts, leveraging community support such as local university financial aid officers, and providing tiered interventions and individualized FAFSA completion support.

As part of this tiered approach, counselors should use FAFSA completion data to inform interventions. In this study, treatment group high school counselors regularly used FAFSA completion data to help them determine which students had completed the FAFSA and which had not. This allowed them to prioritize which students to respond to and what the best approach would be. Counselors can use data to provide differentiated support on FAFSA completion.

Fourth, districts, schools, and college access organizations should actively focus on supporting students who are selected for verification. As research shows, at least 25% of students who are selected for verification do not end up completing the FAFSA, which represents an estimated 104,000 low-income students (DeBaun, 2018). In this dissertation, counselors were provided with training and resources to help them overcome the hurdles of FAFSA verification. Treatment group counselors' students were less likely to experience "verification melt" than control and non-participating students. By providing tools and training to counselors on ways to support students in overcoming the barriers of verification, districts and schools can increase their students' FAFSA completion and access to financial aid.

Finally, the promising results from this small-scale study suggest that participation by schools and districts in similar future studies would be useful. Given the limitation of the relatively small sample size, it is important to replicate this study with a larger sample of schools, counselors, and students. It would also be useful to conduct a similar study in a different context, such a state that does not have a FAFSA completion graduation requirement or a city that is not a 100% public charter district, to see if there would be similar effects. Additionally, given the limited existing research on interventions aimed at decreasing FAFSA verification melt, additional studies should be done to examine effective strategies that counselors and other practitioners can implement. This study provides evidence that participation in such a study is

likely to benefit participants, and the willingness of districts and schools to participate in such future studies can potentially contribute to improved outcomes for many students.

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Appendix A

Needs Assessment Counselor Survey

1. School name:

2. Counselor: senior ratio at school:

3. I believe that FAFSA completion is an important step in the college application process.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

4. I believe counselors should work with students and their families to complete the FAFSA.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

5. It is my responsibility to support students in completing the FAFSA.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

6. Working with students to complete the FAFSA is a major part of my job.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

7. I have received the training I need to support students in completing the FAFSA.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

8. I have the time I need to support students in completing the FAFSA.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

9. I have the tools and resources I need to support students in completing the FAFSA.

   5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

10. I hold FAFSA information and completion nights for students' families.

    Never Do This Once a Year More Than Once a Year More Than Three Times a Year

11. I make sure that every one of the seniors in my caseload has one-on-one support on the FAFSA.

    5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

12. I am satisfied with the FAFSA completion rate at my school.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

13. I know the FAFSA completion rate at my school.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

14. There is more that I can do to increase the FAFSA completion rate at my school.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

15. Ultimately, it is the student and parent's responsibility whether they complete and submit the FAFSA.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, I = strongly disagree.

16. We have a peer mentorship program in place to support students' completion of college access milestones (such as college applications and the FAFSA).

Yes No

17. We use a text message system (such as Signal Vine) to notify students and parents about the FAFSA

Yes No

18. Race or ethnic origin:

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other

19. Years as a college counselor:

a. 0-2
b. 3-5
c. 5-10
d. 10 or more

20. Gender:

a. Female
b. Male

Appendix B

Needs Assessment Tables

Table B1

Descriptive Statistics of FAFSA Completion

FAFSA Completion				
N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
9	.38	.78	.6332	.15857

Table B2

Spearman's Rho Analysis of FAFSA and School Performance Score

			School Performance	FAFSA
Spearman's Rho	School Perf	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.770*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.015
		N	9	9
	FAFSA	Correlation Coefficient	.770*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.
		N	9	9

Note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix C

Inputs	**Outputs**		Outcomes -- Impact		
	Activities	*Participation*	Short	Medium	Long
Time: Trainer's time; High school counselors' time, students' and families' time to complete the FAFSA. Funding for training, materials, FAFSA Completion Sessions, etc. Equipment: computers for FAFSA Completion Sessions, cell phones and text messaging platform, etc. Support from Orleans Parish School District, including access to FAFSA completion data.	Trainings for high school counselors on comprehensive FAFSA completion strategies using a tiered approach including. (Erisman & Steele, 2018; Owen & Westlund, 2016; Page and Castleman, 2016; Roderick et al., 2011) Counselors conduct: • Group meetings for students and parents on FAFSA • One-on-one FAFSA Completion Meetings (Owen & Westlund, 2016)	New Orleans High School Counselors participated High school counselors, students, and families participated	Counselors 'awareness of effective FAFSA completion strategies. Students' and parents' understanding and/or awareness of the FAFSA process.	Students complete the FAFSA (increased FAFSA completion rate across participating New Orleans public high schools).	Increased college enrollment, persistence, and ultimately completion for New Orleans public high school students. While these outcomes were not measurable within the timeframe of this dissertation, research demonstrates that targeted FAFSA support can lead to significant improvements in college enrollment, persistence, and completion (Bettinger, et al., 2013; Bird et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2015; Page and Castleman, 2016).

Appendix D

Post-Training Counselor Survey

1. School name:

2. Counselor: senior ratio at school:

3. Race or ethnic origin:
   - White
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Black or African American
   - Native American or American Indian
   - Asian / Pacific Islander
   - Other

4. Years as a college counselor:
   a. 0-2
   b. 3-5
   c. 5-10
   d. 10 or more

5. Gender:
   a. Female
   b. Male

6. This training was worth my time

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Neutral Somewhat Disagree Disagree

7. This training was high quality

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Neutral Somewhat Disagree Disagree

8. I learned something new about FAFSA completion strategies as a result of today's training

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Neutral Somewhat Disagree Disagree

9. As a result of today's training, I have specific strategies to support my students and their families in completing the FAFSA

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Neutral Somewhat Disagree Disagree

10. List strategies you will use to support your students in completing the FAFSA

Appendix E

FAFSA Completion Survey 2018-19 (Students)

You are invited to complete a four-question survey that will take less than five minutes.

This survey has questions about your school's efforts focused on FAFSA completion. Your participation is voluntary and you can stop at any time. Your answers to these questions will be kept confidential and seen only by researchers outside the district. This is a research study being conducted for a dissertation in the EdD program of the Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

By completing this survey, you are agreeing to participate in the study and your responses will be anonymous.

Questions

1) As a result of this FAFSA Completion Session, I feel more knowledgeable about FAFSA.

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2) As a result of this FAFSA Completion Session, I completed the FAFSA.

Yes No

3) From whom or where did you receive information about at the FAFSA? Check all that apply:

- o Counselor
- o Teacher
- o Friend
- o Parent
- o Online
- o College Access Program (Upward Bound, College Track, etc.)
- o Other _____

4) What else could the school do to provide your family with support on college and financial aid?

Appendix F

End of Year Counselor Interview Questions

I'm interested in hearing about how things have gone this year for you as you have been working with your 12th graders in their process of applying to college.

Let me start by asking how many 12th graders you have in your caseload this year. And do you also have any students from other grade levels at the school? How many?

Tell me about any support you received from the district, school, or other counselors that helped provide ideas or other support for working with your 12th graders on college going issues?

Tell me about the particular things you did with 12th graders and their families this year focused on getting ready for college next year.

PROBE for specific issues covered at all meetings (general college info vs. specific FAFSA info)

How many whole-group FAFSA completion meetings did you hold for families this school year?

How many individual FAFSA completion meetings did you hold with families this school year? With students by themselves?

How often did you review individual FAFSA completion reports? How did you use these?

How often did you send text messages to inform families about the FAFSA and FAFSA completion events?

How many students or families would you say you sent text messages to?

Questions for Treatment group only:
Now I'd like you to think back to the training session we did in October.

Which components of the training and support were most useful?

Was there anything that wasn't covered in that training that you wish had been? IF SO: Could you tell me about that?

Given your experience this year, do you have any recommendations about how to change the training we did in any way? Could you tell me your thoughts about that?

Now I'm interested in hearing your thoughts about the professional learning sessions.

What parts of the monthly professional learning sessions were most useful?

Was there anything you wish you had received that you didn't? Could you tell me about that?

Given your experience this year, do you have any recommendations about how to change the sessions we did in any way? Could you tell me your thoughts about that?

I just have a couple of more questions to conclude.

What would you say you learned from your experience working with 12th graders and their families on the FAFSA this year?

What advice would you give to counselors at other schools about how we can increase the number of students and families completing the FAFSA?

Is there anything else you think it's important for us to know that we haven't discussed yet?

Thanks so much for your participation.

Appendix G

FAFSA Training Plan: Session 1

1) Opening and Introduction Activity (10 min)
2) Review Agenda and Desired Outcomes (5 min)
3) FAFSA Quick Quiz (to break the ice and activate prior knowledge) (10 min)
4) Walk through Resource Binder: https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/resources/counselors-handbook-2018-19.pdf (15 min)
5) Walk through a sample FAFSA (20 min)
   https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/resources/counselors-handbook-2018-19.pdf; https://ifap.ed.gov/sumchngsappsys/attachments/1819SumChangesAppProcessSysGuide.pdf; https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/search#YourSearchResults
6) How to make FAFSA Outreach Easier: Text messaging and other forms of efficient communication (20 min)
   - Reference tools and articles in binder
   - Practice/ Discuss
7) How to Host FAFSA Information Nights (20 min)
   - Speakers: Tulane University Financial Aid Officer and LELA come out to share
   - Review How to Host a FAFSA Completion Event
   - Review list of organizations that can help host FAFSA information nights

*** BREAK with snacks (15 min)

8) How to Access and Review Individual FAFSA Completion Reports (15 min)
   - LOFSA
9) How to respond to Individual FAFSA Completion Reports (20 min)

- Create a data-based system: i.e.: red/ green in excel spreadsheet
- Celebrate all students who have completed
- Identify most efficient and effective strategy for outreach and support for students who have not.
    - Will they receive the support they need at a whole group FAFSA completion event?
    - Do they need an extra nudge? Text message
    - Do they need targeted 1:1 support? Individual meeting
    - Other resources: FAFSA completion events, materials, organizations who can support you

10. Next Steps: Individualized Coaching or Professional Learning Community (20 min)

- Decide
- Schedule meetings for rest of semester

11. Counselors Complete Exit Survey (15 min)

Appendix H

FAFSA Training Plan: Session 2

1. Opening and Welcome
2. Review Agenda and Desired Outcomes
3. Turn and Talk:
    - What was one valuable thing you learned at the last FAFSA training?
    - What's one thing you've done to support your students on completing the FAFSA since the last session?
4. Whole group share-out reporting back from Turn and Talk
5. What is the difference between FAFSA submission and completion discussion and review resource binder
6. What is FAFSA Verification?
7. Review Sample Student Aid Reports
8. Review different codes and appropriate responses
9. Review FAFSA Verification support tools, resources, and steps in resource binder
10. Group Discussion about FAFSA Verification
    - What's one new thing you learned?
    - What questions do you still have?
11. What strategies can counselors take to support students who are selected for verification?
12. Practice: Meetings with students who are selected for verification
13. Feedback on practice
    - What went well?
    - What suggestions do you have? What would you do differently?

14. Take out data tracker: identify students who have not yet completed the FAFSA. Were these students selected for verification? Determine goals and next steps with partner
15. Q & A
16. Next meeting and next steps

Appendix I

Collaborative Learning Session Agenda Template

1. Opening and Welcome Activity
2. Review Agenda and Desired Outcomes
3. Success: what strategies have you successfully implemented that you can share with your colleagues
4. Q & A
5. What challenges are you facing in supporting your students on the FAFSA that you'd like this group's support with?
    - Select challenge(s) to discuss as a group
    - Clarifying questions
    - Probing questions
    - Suggestions and resources
    - Select next steps
6. Data review
    - Take out FAFSA completion data
    - Review with partner
    - What are you noticing?
    - Which students have not completed the FAFSA?
    - What research-based strategy will you try?
    - What's one specific step you'll take?
    - Questions and feedback from partner
7. Goal-setting (individual)

8. Goal-setting (share-out)
9. Next steps and wrap-up

Appendix J

Examples of Training Materials for Counselors

How to Host Your Own FAFSA Completion Workshop

- Hold the workshop during opening hours for the Federal Student Aid Information Center hotline in case you need to call with questions.

  1-800-4FED-AID
  (1-800-433-3243)
  Hours of Operation
  Monday–Friday
  8 a.m.–11 p.m. Eastern time (ET)
  Saturday–Sunday
  11 a.m.–5 p.m. Eastern time (ET)

- Show our three-minute video, "How to Fill Out the FAFSA" at the beginning of the workshop to give an overview of the process.
- Provide handouts to answer frequently asked questions
- Remind students to go to Fafsa.gov to apply.
- Use the FAFSA demo site on a large screen at the front of the room to walk through the application with the whole group.
- Invite local FAFSA experts (see resource list) for extra support and to help answer individual questions.

Source: https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/outreach/host-event/fafsa-completion.jsp

Curriculum Vitae

AMANDA KRUGER HILL

EDUCATION

2016- 2020	**JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY**	Doctor of Educational Leadership Schiffman Fellowship
2006-2007	**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY** **Principal Leadership Institute** GPA: 4.0 with Honors	Master of Educational Leadership Administrative Credential
2004- 2005	**SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERISTY**	Teaching Credential in Social Science
1999-2003	**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY**	Bachelor of Arts in International Studies Minor in Education Departmental and University Honors

EXPERIENCE

2015- Present **COWEN INSTITUTE, TULANE UNIVERSITY** New Orleans, LA

Executive Director and Adjunct Instructor

- Drive organizational agenda forward by building strong external partnerships with diverse groups and constituents at both the local and national levels.
- Lead and manage talented team of 22 individuals using a collaborative and transparent management style that creates a collegial and high-performance environment.
- Serve as a spokesperson and convener for public education and college and career success in New Orleans.
- Manage complex budgets and funding streams.
- Lead fundraising efforts.
- Provide strategic leadership to plan, execute, and evaluate organizational effectiveness.
- Plan curriculum for and teach undergraduate courses in Education and Leadership.

2013-2015 **NEW SCHOOLS FOR NEW ORLEANS** New Orleans, LA

Director of School Reviews

- Led School Quality Reviews comprised of school leaders at 36 different preK-12 schools in New Orleans:
- Implemented best practices based on research of high performing schools across the US.
- Built collaborative teams by convening over 130 school leaders across the city to deliver actionable feedback to school leaders as part of School Reviews.
- Synthesized and analyzed data from classroom observations, interviews, and surveys to provide feedback on high-level strengths and outline key strategies for school improvement.
- Impacted student achievement by delivering comprehensive data-driven analysis to principals and CEOs on strengths and areas for growth.
- Led differentiated professional development and mentorship for 36 school leaders on implementation of action plans.
- United and led citywide High School Consortium comprised of 14 high schools to align on college ready standards and interim assessments. Provide related data analysis, professional development, and resources to school leaders. This resulted in 12% growth on end-of-year assessments at participating high schools from 2013 to 2014.

2013- 2018 **COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, TEACHERS COLLEGE** New Orleans, LA

Principal Coach and Adjunct Instructor

- Coached aspiring principals throughout their internship with a focus on developing skillsets for teacher observation and feedback, data analysis, professional development, and instructional leadership.
- Served as Adjunct Instructor for Data-Driven Leadership course for Summer Principals Academy.
- Prepared and facilitated lessons, graded assignments, and provided feedback on School Design culminating projects.

2013–2015 **RELAY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION** New Orleans, LA

Adjunct Instructor and Cohort Leader

- Co-led New Orleans Cohort of National Principals Academy Fellowship, a highly selective national fellowship, impacting 23 schools and over 5,000 students.
- Planned and facilitated quarterly professional development on data-driven leadership, observation and feedback, and school culture for school leaders.
- Led Instructional Rounds for principals at 23 school sites throughout New Orleans.
- Provided ongoing tailored coaching to help build principals' capacity for teacher observation and feedback, data-driven instruction, and professional development.
- Served as Adjunct Instructor for English Language Arts and Social Science teachers.

2011-2013 **COLLEGE SUMMIT** San Francisco Bay Area, CA

Regional Program Manager

- Managed all programs for College Summit's Northern California region.
- Hired, managed, and led regional team of eight full-time staff members, 100 summer staff, and over 200 volunteers.
- Managed and oversaw the implementation of College Summit Program at 19 high schools in Oakland, San Francisco, Berkeley, and East Palo Alto.
- Provided strategic leadership and ongoing professional development for 19 principals, 50 counselors, and 200 teachers on college access, enrollment strategies, and school-wide plans for increasing college enrollment and persistence.
- Successfully recruited over 2,000 students, hired and managed over 100 summer staff, and oversaw operations for College Summit Summer Workshops at UC Berkeley.
- Provided real-time user-friendly data and feedback to school leaders on college access, and persistence leading to 8% increase in college persistence rates across the region.

2006- 2008 **REACH INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP** Oakland, CA

Design Team Member and Coach

- Served as one of three leaders who facilitated a Design Team of teachers in founding Reach Institute.
- Facilitated Professional Development for teachers and school leaders.
- Mentored, observed, and coached teachers and school leaders to further develop instructional expertise.

2004- 2011 **BAY AREA SCHOOL OF ENTERPRISE (BASE)** Alameda, CA

Co-Founder, Principal, College Counselor, and Teacher

- Co-founded Bay Area School of Enterprise, the first youth-initiated high school in the United States.
- Developed School vision, designed program philosophy, drafted charter, petitioned local school board, and gained unanimous approval from Board of Education.
- Taught Government/Economics, U.S. History, Sociology, English 3 and 4, Integrated Science, Arts, and Leadership for grades 9-12.
- Led students in making an average of 1.5 years growth in reading.
- Led College and Career Counseling program resulting in 100% postsecondary acceptance rates.
- Hired, supervised, and coached teachers, counselors, and elective and afterschool staff.
- Directed student recruitment and enrollment efforts for students.

- Designed curriculum aligned with Common Core and California State Standards and graduation requirements.
- Coordinated and led professional development, onboarding, orientation, observation and feedback, and performance management.
- Led development and implementation of organizational Strategic Plan in 2006 and 2011.
- Managed budget and oversaw financial allocations.
- Successfully built dual enrollment program, partnering with College of Alameda, University of California, and the California Department of Education creating career and college pathways in sound recording, digital media, visual arts, and early childhood education.
- Led school through successful Charter Renewal and Western Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation processes.

LEADERSHIP AND RECOGNITION

- White House Commission on the FAFSA Member
- Louisiana Department of Education Financial Aid Committee Member
- XQ Super School Winner
- Gambit's 40 Under 40 Awardee
- San Francisco Foundation: Koshland Award for Outstanding Civic Unity and Leadership
- Public Commendation from the City and County of Alameda and City of Oakland for Community Impact
- Propeller Future of Schools Challenge Judge
- Tulane University Women's Associations 2015 Honoree

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- Hill, A. K. (2020, January). Plenary panel on public education in New Orleans. Panel moderated at Harvard Strategic Data Project Fellowship Convening, New Orleans, LA.
- Hill, A. K. & Woods, P. (2018, June). College counseling collaborative best practices. Global MindEd Conference, Denver, CL.
- Graf, E., Hill, A. K., Kerich, J., & Reed, S. (2016, April). It takes a village. Presentation at Southern Association of College Admissions Counselors, Miami, FL.
- Hill, A. K., Modica, J., Payne, S., Reed, S., & Woods, P. (2015, March). Dream big, accomplish more through collaboration between schools. CollegeBoard Dream Deferred Conference, New Orleans, LA.